Tainted Spirit: Part Three AGAIN!

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete

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Tainted Spirit: Part Three AGAIN!

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Summary

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Description

A man lies dead and Misao struggles to come to terms with the truth. Tsunami has fallen under Ramia's dark hex & Sasami is fighting to stay in control. Washu finds help in an old friend but is it already too late? Reuploaded. FINISHED 11.Apr.07 :

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

::The Return Of Part Three::

For the record, I have NO idea why this story disappeared off the server (and I wouldn't have known if a kind soul hadn't PMed me to find out). I'm very cross about it at present because a: I didn't do anything to delete it, b: I've not done anything to have my work deleted and c: I've lost my reviews!
So if you left me a review, please take pity and re-review. I do take note of things people say and keep them in mind for future projects, so they are important to me.

And I swear, if this story disappears again, it'll be the last one I upload to FFnet in a while!

Of course, if the original one reappears in the meantime, this one may disappear into oblivion. Sigh. The other version had some last minute amendments which I've lost now and can't remember, so if this doesn't read quite as smoothly, you'll know why!

And here we are. The finale:)

So we got a bit bloody at the end of the last part… any war has its casualties, after all :)

There is one more character to introduce to the Tainted Spirit arc, although she has been mentioned throughout the story so far. Anyone who's read *After The Rain* will be more familiar with her, but she isn't an OC and I did not invent her. She belongs to the OVA-verse and is officially part of Tenchi canon, although I have modified her character role quite a bit.

Considering the situation at hand, it seemed time to bring her out of — shall we say — retirement!

Random observation too while I'm at it — isn't it interesting how many Tenchi characters have those tell-tale gold eyes that generally are associated with the Space Pirate Ryoko? Airi, Priestess of Airai, Queen Candidate Ramia of Juraihelm, Pixy Misa… Rumiya as a parrot

in the Pretty Sammy OVA, and of course, Kagato on the odd occasion, too :)

In the normal order of things, these characters don't generally exist in the same continuity, and Yosho's OVA wife Airi doesn't/hasn't played any part in my fanfic world. But in case anyone is wondering where the Arian connection came from for Kagato and company, it's right there. Airi's OVA-canon green hair and gold eyes suggest that Kagato Jurai could be legitimately (and officially) descended from an Arian source. Nope, it's not so much of a stretch after all!!

Second randomness — some people have been calling me on the whole "Why is Tenchi weakened by all this?" thing, and so I decided for anyone else who happens to be wondering, to explain exactly what was going on in my head when I wrote this whole thing.

. The simple answer is, I have to obey my own continuity rules, or the saga falls apart.. In *The Dying Tree*, Nozomi's account of the future explains that Kagato's attack on Tsunami eventually resulted in the death of Jurai. It also caused the Royal Family to die out one by one from a mysterious fever, and Kagato took his revenge on the Earth, killing the people there, too. Two important factors are in this — 1: If Tenchi had survived this, Ryoko would have brought him with her to Jurai to see Sasami. Nozomi would therefore know he was her father. And 2: If Tenchi had not been afflicted by Tsunami's weakness, then he would have been able to use the Light Hawk Wings to defend his planet. Consequently, then, in the fanon I've established so far, weakness in Tsunami has to equal weakness in Jurai and the Royal Family.

I also am not a fan of the concept that Tenchi is only strong if he has Jurai's power within him. Part of the point of this story arc is to prove that he's more than just his Light Hawk Wings, and I think that will become clear as the story progresses. After all, it would be very boring if he could solve every problem with Tsunami's magic, wouldn't it?

Anyone wondering about Tsunami's weakness where Arian magic is concerned — this is also obeying my continuity too. The Dark Heart of Jurai, where all this nonsense fic of mine started, was originally infected by Kagato's dark magic. (If you've read *After the Rain*, his Arian connection is explained/revealed in some further detail there). Hence it makes logical continuity sense for Tsunami to be once more weak at the hands of Ramia's spells.

I hope that clears up any confusion about this :) As I said, I try not to break with my own continuity if I can at all help it — universal

laws must be obeyed, and all of that jazz!

Okay, enough rambling. Back to the story now…!

Usual legalities apply!

Synopsis

Beside herself with guilt and grief over the death of Yurikage, Misao struggles to come to terms with what she's done and who she's become. Meanwhile her newest ally is fighting for her very life, as she struggles against the powerful Goddess that surges inside of her. The feral spirit of Jurai's cold core has been woken within Tsunami's heart, driving her to the brink of madness — but is Sasami strong enough to pull her back again?

Jurai's situation is growing ever more grave, as the climate reverts back to its original unsettled, arid state, and those possessed of Jurai's power continue to weaken as Tsunami becomes more and more out of control. Ramia's influence has awoken in her a deep desire to destroy, and as Sasami struggles to keep her black thoughts in check, it seems as though Jurai's protective spirit will be the one to demolish the world completely.

But Ramia has reckoned without the Arian spirit that flickers within her daughter's own heart, and as Misao's bitterness over her crimes deepens, so does her resolve to settle matters once and for all. As Lady of Yousai, she must face her mother and find a way to break Ramia's dark spell…

But with Tsunami succumbing to the darkness, is it already too late?

TAINTED SPIRIT: PART THREE
A Tenchi Muyo! FANFICTION
by
VRAIEESPRIT

Chapter One
The Planet Airai

At first, all was still.

The woman moved slowly and silently through the dark tunnels, a strange bluish flame the only light to her path as she made her way resolutely forwards, determination in her dark red eyes as she headed deeper and deeper into the black-stone network of passages. Without a moment of hesitation, she descended deeper and deeper into the core of the planet, stepping carefully down the steep flights of rough-hewn stairways that led to the main chamber. A door loomed out of the darkness and she bit her lip, placing her hand gently against the seal.

"By the spirits that protect Airai, I summon you." She murmured, and the door creaked and slid slowly back, revealing a chamber

beyond. Carefully she stepped inside, moving carefully towards the black bier that stood in the centre, flanked by similar candles. As she moved forward, she faltered, letting out a faint gasp of surprise as she registered the fact the funerary platform was already empty, and she almost dropped her candle in her surprise, glancing around her anxiously for any sign of the small chamber's occupant.

"Najya?" She whispered. "Nayja-neesan, are you here?"

At first there was no response, then, as if called by some hidden force, the candles around the bier flared into light of their own accord, startling the woman and causing her hand to fly to her chest.

"Najya!" She exclaimed. "I know you're here… if you're awake, make yourself visible to me! I want to see you!"

There was a sudden rush of air, and slowly the form of a woman began to materialise before her, glittering silver hair still wound around her head in the same braids her sister had woven before she had been buried. For a moment there was silence between them, then the visitor tossed her spluttering candle aside with little respect for the glowing flame, throwing her arms around the apparition with a cry of relief.

"*Najya*!" She murmured. "Oh, I've missed you so much!"

"Aya." The spectre was becoming more and more substantial by the minute, and as the strange glow faded from her body, it was easy for Aya to believe her sister was unchanged since the day she had first been interred beneath the Arian soil. "I've been waiting for you… I knew you'd come."

"I should have realised you'd already be awake." Aya stood back, holding her companion at arm's length as she eyed the woman's dusty visage. "So many things have happened, and so much has changed. And yet…"

"Father is dead." Najya cut across her companion softly. "Isn't he?"

"Yes." Aya bit her lip. "He passed away two summers ago. I half-wondered if you'd wake then, but you didn't. Mother wasn't sure if you ever would… but I had faith. I knew you hadn't really died… I knew that you sealed yourself, that's all. But you took so long to wake up — I decided I'd have to come here and try and stir you myself. Somehow."

"Something is wrong." Najya murmured. "My mind is… hazy, Aya. I don't remember… a lot of things. But if Father is dead, I am the Akara mage. And… and that means…"

She frowned, her brows knitting together as she contemplated.

“The Saotome have stirred.” She added at length. “I sensed a great rising force and it had their taint… that’s why I woke up. They are up to something… of that I am sure.”

“The Saotome mage has been locked up in prison on some colony of Jurai for the past ten years.” Aya slipped her hand into her sister’s, leading her slowly towards the exit of the cold, barren death-chamber. “And it would be more comfortable to discuss this above ground, not here where there are spiders enough to populate the whole galaxy. Will you come to the surface, Najya-neechan? Everyone will be happy to see you, and you need to clean yourself. You’re a mess… you still look more than a little like a corpse, dressed in those robes and with your hair wound round your head in that manner.”

Najya offered a faint smile, nodding her head.

“Yes.” She agreed. “I’d like to see the sun again. It’s been far too long. But allow me.”

She gripped hold of her companion’s arm more tightly, and Aya drew breath sharply as the layers of rock and stone seemed to blur past them, bright sunlight forging through as they re-materialised on the surface of the planet above. Bright daylight dazzled her for a moment, and she offered her companion a wry smile.

“You *are* the mage. I should call you Najya-sama, now.” She acknowledged. “But Oneechan, it’s just so good to see you again.”

“Likewise.” Najya agreed softly. “I feel like I have slept such a long time. I’ve missed much. The Saotome mage is in prison? I can’t imagine that fox Masaru being captured so easily.”

“Masaru is dead.” Aya shook her head. “His daughter Ramia inherited the Saotome magic, and it is she who is imprisoned in the tower on Yousai.”

“Ramia.” Najya’s eyes narrowed. “I remember her… a sweet-faced, innocent seeming child. A beauty, with nice manners and a winning smile. I should have known that it wasn’t Masaru’s energy that roused me. This is the dark, manipulative taint of an evil woman that I can smell with every breath I take. It’s so powerful that it almost chokes me.”

“When Masaru died, Ramia was newly the bride of the Lord of Yousai. I think the Saotome sought to gain political power and alliance by annexing one of Jurai’s more peaceful colonies.” Aya said gravely. “But they failed. The Crown Prince of Jurai helped to seal her

in her prison, and there she's been for ten years. Nothing has happened in that time. The Saotome here are weakened by her absence, and unable to cohesively form any kind of assault on us. We made progress, spreading peace across Airai, and destroying covens of dark magic as we went. The Mikara clan were defeated and pacified, their black arts laid permanently to rest. But the same cannot be said of the Saotome — and then father was struck by illness and he died. Since then we have had no mage to guide us, either. I knew you must still be alive, since Father's power didn't transfer to me when he died. But you didn't wake. And… and I suppose we didn't really know what to do, until you did."

"Well, I am awake now." Najya flexed her hands, gazing up at the sky with troubled red eyes. "And I remember, little by little, the events that led me to be so long asleep. But now it's different… I knew that if I ever woke, it would be as the Akara mage. I'm resigned to that. But this darkness — it spreads further with every moment. Ramia might be in prison, but she is far from helpless."

"Strange things have been happening on the planet Jurai in recent days." Aya admitted. "Weakness among the royal family, instability in the climate. Do you think it's connected?"

"I've been to Jurai, and I know their ways." Najya nodded grimly. "Yes, Aya, I do. And I'm afraid that it means the Akara will have to do without me for a while longer. I must go to Yousai and see this situation for myself. If I can, I must bring down this Ramia and end the Saotome line, before the curse spreads into a new generation. We can't keep fighting this same battle for Airai's future, over and over again."

"But Najya!"

"I must go. You know that." Najya shook her head. "Be careful, Aya, and take care of Mother and the others. I'll return as soon as I can, I promise."

With that she shimmered with light, her body glittering as she surged upwards towards the sky, and Aya sighed, watching her sister disappear with a heavy heart.

"But Ramia already *has* an heiress, and you don't." She murmured. "It might not be the Saotome line you end, Najya-neechan… stay safe. Please don't have awoken just so that I can bury my sister for the second time!"

For a moment nothing moved in the small Yousai bedchamber, as

the glow of light trapping Ryoko and Kamidake against the wall seemed to grow and strengthen as Tsunami drew on her magic, her eyes glittering with malice and amusement as she observed the apprehensive expressions on her captives' faces.

"You are pathetic." She murmured. "Do you think there is anything you can do to stop me?"

"Sasami!" Ryoko found her voice at this moment, light glowing from her fingers as she struggled to regain some composure. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. Stop this! Stop all of this! You know you don't want to hurt us, not really!"

"Do you listen to a word I say?" Tsunami's eyes narrowed, and Ryoko thought she saw a flicker of fire stir deep in their cold empty depths. "I told you. Sasami is gone. I have engulfed her and her will completely. She is no longer useful to me. I have my freedom and my life… and I do not answer to you, or to anyone. You can shout till you're blue in the face… Sasami is dead."

"I don't believe you!" As the flare tightened around the pair, Kamidake thrust himself forwards, his gold staff clutched in his hand as he held it out in front of his body. "I *know* Tsunami. I know that she protects, loves and nurtures those she cares for. And I know she loves Sasami, too. You are not Tsunami. You are an imposter."

"Insolence!" Tsunami's expression became one of anger and she flexed her hand, a bolt of white light shooting through the barrier and knocking Kamidake clean off his feet. "Don't you dare speak so to me! I know who you are, Knight of Jurai! I chose you for my purpose and I can discard you just as easily. You no longer have a use to me. Like Sasami, you are no longer necessary to further Tsunami's life. Make no mistake about it, Kamidake. I am Tsunami, and noone else."

"Kamidake!" Ryoko dropped at the knight's side. "Are you all right?"

Kamidake's eyes flickered open, but he didn't speak, and at the look on his face Ryoko's expression darkened.

"All right, Tsunami." She said frankly, getting to her feet and flaring bright amber energy from her palms. "My father hurt you once with his Arian dark magic, so lets see if I can do the same. You're not invincible, even if you think you are. You might believe you're strong, but you're nothing without Sasami. Whatever you say, we both know she's the one with the personality and the power in the relationship. Otherwise why have you kept her alive so long as this, huh? Why did you need to save her life against Yugi, if she was so useless to you?

Face it, without Sasami, you don't have a life at all. You can't kill her. She's still in there somewhere, and I'm going to bring her out!"

She spread her fingers, and a volley of amber fire clattered against the white forcefield, but the bolts sizzled and faded against the power of Tsunami's energy, and the Goddess laughed, seemingly amused at the pirate's attack.

"You are stupid." She said derisively. "You are not your father, Ryoko. And I do not fear the arts of Airai. Nor do I fear you. You are nothing but a bastard-born Space Pirate, cashing in on a dubious connection to my Royal House of Jurai. If I choose, I can slay all of you with one thought. You are no match for me, no matter how strong you think you are."

"We'll see." Ryoko glanced around her for a new weapon, grabbing up Kamidake's dropped staff and waving it determinedly. "I'm not going to die easily, so you might as well prepare yourself for a fight. Even if you think I'm nothing, I'm going to disagree… and we'll see who's proven right."

"That piece of metal won't help you. I drained it of all energy long ago." Tsunami snorted, raising her hand and the staff flew from Ryoko's grip through the barrier and into the Goddess's own hand. She glanced at it for a moment, then chuckled, tossing it aside. "See? Your magic and your bravado aren't going to save you. I am Tsunami. Nobody can stop me!"

At that the white light intensified, and Ryoko dropped back to Kamidake's side, flaring a forcefield around them both as she muttered a curse under her breath.

"This is nuts." She murmured. "Tsunami's supposed to be a Goddess… if she's been poisoned, how is that Ramia bitch controlling her so easily? Seiryo said something like this might happen, but he conveniently forgot to mention what we do about it if it does. Where the hell is Washu when you need her? She always has a bright idea at a time like this!"

She glanced up at the shimmering form of the Goddess, a mixture of fear and apprehension swirling through her heart as she registered the expression of determination on the woman's face. Gone was the peaceful, pretty visage of Jurai's benevolent deity, her fine features twisted into a look of such icy hatred that Ryoko thought she looked more like an evil sorceress than a source of holy inspiration. Tsunami raised her hands, as if preparing for the kill, but at the last moment she seemed to falter, and Ryoko blinked, staring at the woman a

second time. Was that…? Had she seen…?

“Well?” She taunted. “Are you all talk and no action, big bad Goddess Tsunami?”

“Shut up!” Tsunami exclaimed, but somehow Ryoko could tell that her opponant wasn’t speaking to her. “*Shut up*! *Stop* it!”

“Sasami?” She murmured, as from deep within the glow surrounding the Goddess, a second figure became briefly visible. For a moment Ryoko met the gaze of the younger Princess, no more than a shadow against the bright light of Tsunami’s magic. Then she was gone, but the vision gave the pirate renewed hope.

“*Sasami!*” She screamed. “Sasami, I know you’re in there! I know you are! If you have any control over her at all, for the love of all that’s good in this universe stop her!”

“Sasami is dead!” Tsunami thundered, illuminating the whole chamber with her anger, but somehow it lacked the potency of before, and Ryoko scrambled to her feet, helping the dazed Kamidake up with her.

“Sasami wouldn’t hurt me and she wouldn’t hurt Kamidake.” She said firmly. “You know that, and I told you, she’s stronger than you. Give it up, Tsunami. Or should I say… *Ramia?*”

“I am *Tsunami*.” Tsunami’s eyes glittered with anger. “I am noone but her.”

“T… Tsunami can’t be… assimilated away… from Jurai.” Kamidake raised his gaze at that moment, drawing a deep breath into his lungs as he sought to steady himself. “Bewitched magic might be powering you, but you are not Tsunami’s true form. This is not your will. Princess Sasami, I beg you. If you can hear me, I have faith in you. Ryoko and I both do.”

“K… Kamidake?”

The voice was tentative and strange, seeming to echo out of nothingness, but Ryoko knew it had come from the apparition in front of them, as Sasami fought to regain supremacy over her form. The barrier surrounding them flickered and died, and the Goddess took a hesitant step forward, holding out a hand to the Knight. “Kamidake I… I’m sorry. I can’t… I have to… I can’t stop her. She’s too… strong. I can’t!”

“Yes, you can.” Ryoko said quietly. “Sasami, you can. You know you can. You flew into space to save Tenchi from Tokimi, when you

and Washu blew up Kihaku. That was Sasami, not Tsunami, who did those things. You can do this."

"Ryoko is right." Kamidake brushed his fingers against the spectre's ghostly ones, and her expression became stricken.

"She wants to kill you. She wants to kill everything." She whispered. "I have to go. Leave… get people away. I don't know what might happen…"

With that the voice faltered, and with a flash of light, Tsunami disappeared from the chamber, leaving a dazed pirate and knight to register the deep burn marks in the wall.

"Sasami-hime." Kamidake struggled to his feet, groping for his staff, but Ryoko grabbed him by the arm, shaking his head.

"Woah there, superman. You took a heck of a blow to the head and there's already one body to cart back to Jurai." She said soberly. "Hang on a minute. Sasami left here for a reason, you know that as well as I do. She doesn't think she can hold Tsunami's anger back, so she left in order to make sure she didn't hurt us."

"But Ryoko…" Kamidake gazed at the spot where his Princess had stood, then he nodded his head.

"Yes, you're right." He agreed gravely. "But that doesn't solve the problem. We have our lives, true enough, but who knows what Ramia has unleashed, if she truly has cast this spell on Tsunami's heart and soul."

"You said she couldn't be the true incarnation of Tsunami. What did you mean?" Ryoko asked. Kamidake frowned.

"When Sasami-hime assumed Tsunami's form before, she took magic from Azaka and I to do it." He said quietly. "It was only temporary… the magic wouldn't have sustained the transformation indefinitely. Princess Sasami's consciousness is still seperate from Tsunami's, and if Sasami were truly to die, Tsunami would also cease to exist. They are the same soul, so without Sasami, Tsunami cannot operate. But whatever she says about it, they're not one being, and Tsunami isn't at full strength. To do that, they'd have to be on Jurai, where Tsunami's heart and soul truly lie. But…"

"But…?"

"Well, that doesn't mean she's not dangerous." Kamidake glanced at the scorch marks again, then bit his lip, his grip tightening on his staff. "Even in a temporary state, Tsunami's magic is formidable, and

probably beyond us in battle. We need to find Lord Tennan and alert him to the danger. And Lady Misao… she might be in danger also, if she has been used in the way you indicated. I suspect that Sasami-sama will try and take Tsunami as far from Yousai as she can, but she's been ill for some time and I don't know how strong she really is."

"I guess we'll find out." Ryoko said darkly, grabbing her companion by the arm. "All right. Come on. We'll find Seiryo and see what he says about it. And that sword of… of Yurikage's. It had some kind of impact on Misao, so it must be important… maybe it can even help us fight against this new danger."

"Ramia must be a very powerful witch indeed." Kamidake reflected, as they hurried through the halls of the complex. "To have bewitched Tsunami from her tower prison."

"Misao said something about souls in a box." Ryoko said thoughtfully. "She didn't understand any more than me what that meant. I'll tell you who does, though, and that's the bird-boy. Rumiya. Misao told me himself that all this serving boy nonsense has been a cover. He's Ramia's little dogsbody, and if we can root him out, I'm sure we can scare him into telling us what we want to know. He went after Misao, when she disappeared after Yurikage was felled, but he wasn't with her when I found her, so my guess is he's gone underground and I'll have to search for him if I'm going to beat the truth out of him. You go and tell Seiryo about Sasami. I'm going to see if I can track him down."

"That's a good idea." Kamidake nodded. "But come with me to Lord Tennan first. Take Yurikage-dono's sword… we know it can cause the boy harm."

"I don't need any sword." Ryoko said blackly. "I'm part Arian, remember? Haki couldn't hurt me because of that. I bet that I can hold my own against a fifteen year old boy. I was a pirate, remember. I'm no soft touch."

"All right. But be careful, Ryoko-sama." Kamidake told her gravely. "We don't want to be interring another corpse on our return home."

"The same goes for you." Ryoko said frankly. "Washu and Ryo Ohki will be here soon, in any case. I'll be glad of it, to tell you the truth. She seems to know something more about Tsunami than most, and I think they had a few heart to heart moments on the way to Kihaku. Maybe she'll have an idea about what we can do!"

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

It was dark, wherever she was.

Sasami shivered and closed her eyes, clenching and unclenching her fists as she fought off the pulses of fear that threatened to rage through her young body. From each side, the walls of her cold, bleak prison seemed to close in around her, the air becoming thick and oppressive as she found it more and more difficult to breathe. From somewhere in the black shadows, a pair of golden, cat-like eyes glittered at her, watching her impassively as she shrank back against the cool hard stone.

"*Stay out of this*."

The voice did not seem to come from anywhere, and yet Sasami heard it, the words piercing through her heart to the very core of her being. The tone was Tsunami's, but the order was hard and cold, and lacked the Goddess's usual gentle inflection and Sasami felt tears spring into her eyes, reaching up to dash them away as she redoubled her efforts to hold firm against Tsunami's will.

"*I warn you, Princess Sasami. I created you. I can destroy you. If you do not obey me, I will have no choice*."

The words were flat and demanding, echoing around the small, empty prison cell, but Sasami pushed them away, reaching out to touch the crumbling brickwork as she raised her gaze bravely to meet those golden, ghostly eyes.

"I know who you are." She whispered. "Ryoko called you Ramia. You're the one who wants to hurt me… but it isn't going to work! You might think you have me trapped, but so long as I'm in here, you know that you can't touch me. You can't break down my will, because you're not really Tsunami and I won't listen to what you say!"

"*I am Tsunami*." The eyes glinted menacingly in the darkness, as the image of the Goddess's face became imprinted on the cell wall, her appearance strange and feral. "*I have her memory and I control her power. I hold the magic of the Light Hawk in my hands. Who are you to say I am not Jurai's Goddess? You are nothing but a mortal shell… you are worthless to me. Your choice is simple, Princess Sasami of Jurai. Submit and become part of me, or perish*."

"I won't do either one!" Sasami screwed up her eyes, as her nerve began to waver. "You'll kill people and I won't let you do it! You're not Tsunami and I don't care what you say to me, I know you're not Tsunami because I know who she really is, so there! You don't know anything about me and if you really were Tsunami-kami-sama you'd know my true name and my true identity! You might be using her magic, and you might be controlling her somehow. But you're not Jurai's Goddess and I won't let you hurt people I care about!"

"*So it comes to this then, does it*?" There was almost a note of exasperation in the apparition's voice this time, as whiteish energy glittered around her spectral body. The strange amber eyes seemed to flicker with cold fire as she observed Sasami's huddled, shivering form, and then she smiled.

"*Why are all humans so sure they can stand up against the will of a God*?" She murmured softly. "*Surely you know that with one sweep of my magic I could destroy this entire galaxy, and re-align half of the known universe. And yet you choose to defy me? It's laughable. You have no idea what you deal with, little girl. No idea at all.*"

"*You're* the one who has no idea!" Sasami shot back, her eyes snapping open as she faced her opponant resolutely. "You can't control Tsunami fully so long as I'm here. If you could, Ryoko and Kamidake would have been dead, but I stopped you. *I stopped you*! So stop pretending and tell me who you really are, Ramia! Tell me what you want from me and from Tsunami-kami-sama!"

"*Isn't that obvious?*" The apparition reached out a ghostly arm, touching Sasami gently under the chin as she lifted the child's face to hers. Sasami flinched back at the coldness of her touch, realising as she did so that the walls of her prison were beginning to break down, and she bit her lip, urging them back in place as she fought to push back the evil spirit that drifted around her cell. "*I want power and I want freedom. Too long have I been trapped inside that stupid tower, at the mercy of Jurai's magic. Well, if I can't break down Jurai's power, I thought I might harness it for my own ends. Ramia, Tsunami, it makes no difference what name you use. Tsunami's soul belongs to me, Princess Sasami. And she obeys my will now*."

"The demon of Tounochi!" Realisation flooded Sasami's features, followed by, "*You're* the creature Haki tried to release!"

"*Yes, but your Goddess prevented my previous attempt*." The spectre looked annoyed. "*And my agent failed… at least, in part*."

"Haki." Sasami breathed. "He's another of your puppets, is he? You

control him, just like you think you control Tsunami?"

"I do control Tsunami, you stupid girl… and I will prove it to you. You won't hold out against me forever." The voice had changed now, impatient and slightly gutteral and Sasami knew that Ramia herself spoke to her, the blueish haze of Tsunami's hair glimmering and changing to the colour of blood cascading over her shoulders and down her back. "You are a fool if you think you can evade the power of my dark arts! Even Tsunami couldn't resist, so what makes you think *you* can?"

Sasami scrambled to her feet, clenching her fists tightly as a faint haze of light flickered around her.

"Because *I* am Tsunami's soul." She said defiantly. "*I* am Tsunami."

There was a peal of incredulous laughter, and Sasami felt the translucent hand brush across her cheek sharply, before it was withdrawn.

"I am not stupid." The voice said quietly. "You will have to do better."

"Fine. Don't believe me." Sasami folded her arms across her chest. "But I won't let you hurt people and I'll fight back against you! You had Misao kidnapped, I know you did, because if Haki is working for you, then you must have ordered him to do that as well! And that bird belongs to you too, doesn't he? You hurt my friend and…"

"You are fond of Misao, Sasami-chan?" The voice was gentle and deceptively enticing, and Sasami faltered, staring at her ghostly foe in consternation. "Yes, I thought so. It's a pity she doesn't share the same affection for you, isn't it?"

"I… I don't understand." Sasami whispered. "What do you mean? I'm not going to be fooled by your lies, so don't think that I am!"

"I don't have to lie to you, you stupid child." Now the words were once more hard and cold, cutting through Sasami like a knife and sending a shiver down her spine. "Misao is the daughter of Lady Ramia, the heiress of Yousai and the child of the Saotome Mage of Airai. She is mine, and always has been. Just as she was when she attacked you in your chamber. Just as she was when she slew your friend Yurikage. Misao is but *one* name for her. I like to think of her as Misa — the girl who obeys my command without question, even if it involves spilling blood."

"*What*?" Horror flooded Sasami's expression as a wave of images washed through her memories, causing her to cry out and sink to the

floor of her cell, clutching her head in her hands as pictures of the battle unfolded before her eyes. “No… no! I *won’t* believe… it’s not true! *It’s not true*!”

“Yes, it is.” The voice said remorselessly. “Misao fights for me. She has no loyalty to you or to Jurai. So you see, Sasami, it’s hopeless. Give up now. You are already weak. It is futile to fight against me… you will only suffer more that way. See sense and submit.”

“I won’t!” Sasami protested, but even as she spoke the words she felt her control over the cell walls dissipating, as the bricks came tumbling down on each side, revealing the glow of sinister magic beyond. Somewhere in the background she was aware of more laughter, and tears glittered on her cheeks as she felt her consciousness fading away.

“I won’t let you win.” She murmured, as the world began to go dark around her. “I *won’t*! Somehow, I must hang on… I mustn’t let you hurt the people I love!”

“So she still thinks she can fight me.”

Ramia rested her chin in her hands, gazing pensively out at the landscape of Shinoshi as she turned over events in her head. “I’m almost amused by her spunk, if you want the truth, Rumiya. I almost wonder whether they breed them on Jurai to be defiant and rude and to do things to upset people like me. She definitely seems sure of herself — and yet she has no idea what she’s dealing with, not yet. I’ll give her a little longer to submit to me. Failing that, it shouldn’t be so hard to kill her — but it’s more fun for her to see what I intend for Tsunami before I put an end to either or both of them.”

She turned suddenly, her gaze falling on the apprehensive blue bird who fluttered uneasily along her towel rail, his gold eyes clouded and uncertain as he watched his mistress’s face closely. Ramia’s eyes narrowed and she frowned, holding out her hand to him. He hesitated, and Ramia raised an eyebrow, beckoning to him.

“Come.” She said softly, and with a reluctant sweep of his wings, Rumiya obeyed, landing uneasily on her outstretched finger. Ramia brushed her free hand gently over his head, eying him thoughtfully as she did so.

“Misao failed me, Rumiya.”

The words were soft-spoken, but they held a barb in their depths, and Rumiya tensed, cocking his head on one side as he gauged his

mistress's temper. Ramia pursed her lips, nodding her head.

"Yes." She agreed. "I am angry. Even my fun with Tsunami — yes, even that can't take away the bitter taste in my mouth that a child of mine should be so incapable of carrying out a direct and specific order. Not that it bothers me any, that Sasami's foolish companion lies dead, but the pirate woman still exists. Tsunami's memories are fleeting and brief when I touch her likeness, but it was enough to tell me that she spoke the truth. She is cousin Kagato's descendant… and as such, she is a Saotome. I am not able to kill her the same way I killed my husband. This troubles me… and Misao was not even able to fulfil this small task. She could prove a complication — this must be resolved."

"Lady Ramia, if Ryoko is a Saotome, surely Misao-sama can't hurt her either?" Rumiya offered faintly, but Ramia let out a snort of exasperation, flicking her hand and causing him to fly across to the far side of the chamber, flapping his wings to gain height as he eyed her warily.

"There are other ways to kill than to steal someone's soul." She said in dangerously low tones. "I am rather limited in my methods, being locked away like this. But Misa has more than proven she can use her weapon to take someone's life. I expect nothing but perfection and ruthlessness from my little assassin. Who should I blame for her failure, Rumiya? Should I blame my weak-natured husband for producing such a pathetic offspring? Myself, for believing she could ever be any kind of Arian descendant? Misao, for taking matters into her own hands? Or you, for not giving her my orders correctly? Who do you think, Rumiya? Who should bear the punishment for this failure?"

Rumiya landed on the curtain rail above the window, and as he gazed down on her, Ramia was surprised to see his gaze lacked its usual trepidation at her veiled threat. She frowned, taking in his dull, clouded expression for a moment, then she offered him an icy smile.

"I see." She said softly. "My daughter has rejected you. You are a fool, Rumiya. You are mine, body and soul… but you are not worthy of my heiress. Even if she is half-blooded and even if she is weak, she is still far beyond your reach."

"I don't want you to make Misao-sama hurt anyone else ever again." Rumiya seemed to make up his mind, gathering his courage as he swooped down towards her, morphing himself into his human form as he did so. "I don't care what you do to me, Ramia-sama. But please, don't make her do that again. It hurt her… it really upset her. And I

don't… I can't see her like that."

"She hates you now, I suppose. Now she knows what you truly are." Ramia said flippantly, turning her back on him as she gazed up towards the sky. "But it was to be expected. I am the only one who has ever given you anything, Rumiya. I gave you life and purpose — remember that. You shouldn't waste time or emotion being so squeamish about someone else's feelings. After all, I could have Tsunami kill Misao in the next few minutes, and then where would you be?"

"No!" Rumiya grabbed Ramia by the wrists, terror in his eyes, and Ramia laughed, shaking his hands off her as she shook her head chidingly.

"Now now. I don't expect such familiarity from you." She said warningly. "Mind your manners and your station, Rumiya. As yet I don't want to kill you, but I still can, and it might become a possibility if you continue with such behaviour."

Rumiya bit his lip, shaking his head.

"Please, Lady Ramia." He begged, dropping to his knees before her as he clasped his hands together. "Please don't make Misa kill anyone else. Misao-sama remembers now, everything that Misa does. She'd know what she was doing, and I don't want to see her go through that again. I swear, I'll do whatever you ask of me — even help you to slay Tsunami, if I must. Anything at all. But don't hurt Lady Misao again. I don't want to see her cry again!"

"Why, Rumiya, I do believe you are in love with my daughter." Ramia said, interest in her eyes. "And I thought I was merely teasing you, but it seems you are so soft as to have a weakness for the girl."

Rumiya blushed, dropping his head, and Ramia rested her palm gently on his scalp, running her fingers through his tousled brown hair.

"I want Ryoko dead." She whispered. "*I* will worry about Tsunami. She and Haki are within my power, after all. I will soon take care of them both, and I will take great pleasure in doing so, also. But this Ryoko — this pirate who can touch the spell I cast on Haki — I can't reach her soul from my chamber, even if you did bring me something of hers to cast a spell over. After all, she's not like Misao — there's no sleeping spirit to wake in this one. So that will be your mission, Rumiya. If you complete the task that Misao failed to execute, then I shall not make her kill in my name again. Does that seem fair to you? Misao will not be forced to spill blood, after all, if you do it *for* her."

Her eyes narrowed, a predatorial glint entering their depths, and she tilted her head, eying him pensively.

“But beware, Rumiya. I won’t be failed again. If you do not succeed, then your own life will be forfeit. As it is, they know too much — should they be able to connect you more closely to me, I will discard you. Do you understand? Kill Ryoko and protect Misao — or die at my hand.”

Rumiya gulped, staring up at his mistress in horror. A slight, cruel smile spread across Ramia’s face at his expression, and she patted him on the shoulder.

“Well, my servant?” She asked softly. “Will you accept my terms?”

There was a long silence, as Rumiya twisted his fingers together. Then, at length, he seemed to stiffen, raising his eyes resolutely to his companion.

“Yes.” He said quietly. “I will.”

———

“So, very soon we’ll find out exactly what’s at the root of all of this.”

Washu leant against Ryo Ohki’s control panels, gravity in her green eyes as the jagged craft speeded towards the orbit of the gem planet Yousai. “I have to admit I know very little about this world, except for it’s reputation as a gem mining colony. I don’t like going into a situation badly prepared — but in this instance, we have no choice.”

“We know a little bit, Washu-san.” Sakura hugged her knees to her chest, glancing up from where she was huddled against the sturdy ship’s wall. “We know what Romio-san told us, about Lady Ramia and the voodoo magic she has. That’s something to go on, isn’t it?”

“Well, it means we want to stay well out of her way.” Tenchi said grimly. “I don’t like the sound of any of it, to be quite honest. And we’ve still not heard from Ryoko, which concerns me even more. With all of this going on — Haki is involved, we know that. Don’t we? Ryoko might be bewitched for all we know. She might even be dead. Ryo Ohki might have been fooled somehow — we really have no idea.”

Ryo Ohki let out an indignant yowl at that, lights flickering across her crystals, and Hiroshi pulled a rueful face.

“Masaki, don’t offend the spaceship until she’s landed. I don’t know about you but I’d rather not be spat out into space.” He said frankly.

“Ryo Ohki, Tenchi didn’t mean it. It’s the fever talking. He’s babbling. Delerium. That’s all.”

“Ryo Ohki’s not fooled so easily.” Washu rested her hand gently on Ryo Ohki’s units, and the control crystals hovered around her head, the cabbit’s other self reflected in their shimmering surface. “I designed her to be better than that, and besides, Tenchi, just like you, Ryo Ohki loves Ryoko. True, it’s a different kind of love, but it’s just as binding. I don’t think it would be so easy to fox her senses as all that.”

“I guess not. I’m sorry, Ryo Ohki.” Tenchi held up his hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean to offend you. But I’ve had no insight or impulse about her since she left with Haki. In the past there have been times when I’ve seen flashes — moments when I’ve known what she’s going through. But now… nothing. Nothing at all.”

“You can really do that? Like, psychically?” Sakura stared at him. Tenchi shrugged miserably.

“Apparently not any more.” He said with a sigh. “I have no idea what’s going on and it’s making me crabby.”

“I wonder if we should have left you on Jurai.” Washu sighed. “Your magic is drained, Tenchi, and that’s your intuitiveness where Ryoko is concerned is probably dampened due to that. Maybe you would have been safer with Ayeka and Takeru — but I didn’t want to leave you on a planet that might erupt into chaos, and besides, Ryo Ohki told me where Ryoko was, before we left. I just didn’t tell you, because I knew exactly how you’d react if I did and I wanted a quiet journey.”

“You *know* where she is?” Tenchi was on his feet in an instant, stumbling as a wave of dizziness washed over him and almost falling headlong. Hiroshi grabbed at him frantically, nearly sending the both of them tumbling over as Ryo Ohki made a sharp veer to the left, miaowing loudly as she set Yousai within her sights. Washu sighed, shaking her head slowly.

“Exactly my point.” She said wearily. “Tenchi, sit down and act like an adult, please? Ryoko is quite safe. Ryoko is on Yousai, where we’re heading right now. You’ll see her soon. She’s been sending urgent messages to Ryo Ohki to call her there for a while, and I managed to pick as much up from her before we set off. So you needn’t fret. We’ll all be reunited again before you know it.”

“Oh.” Tenchi sank back against the deck, a rueful look on his face. “All right. I’m sorry. And I’m relieved to know it. I’ve missed her, and

with all this going on — I want to know she hasn't been affected like Ayeka and I have been, I suppose. She's good at pretending she's fine, so I won't be happy till I see her for myself."

"Er, Washu-san?" Hiroshi turned from the window, biting his lip as he eyed the scientist earnestly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course. What is it?" Washu frowned. "Something troubling you, Ikeda-san?"

"Well… you know those… those Wings of Tenchi's that you think he's lost?" Hiroshi said slowly. "The ones that you said looked like spokes of a… a wheel or something like that?"

"Yes?" Tenchi looked bewildered. "What about them?"

"I think I've sort of found them. That's all." Hiroshi swallowed hard as he lifted his hand, pointing out into the bleak space beyond. "*She* has them. And she doesn't look like the kind of person who'll be coaxed into giving them back."

"*What*?" Washu was at his side in a minute, muttering a curse in her native tongue as she pressed her hands to the glass, her eyes widening in horrified disbelief. "*Tsunami*? But what… how..?"

"Tsunami?" Fear flickered in Sakura's gaze. "That's the Goddess woman you were talking about? The one who, you know, controls all of Jurai and stuff?"

"I thought she was meant to be a good guy?" Hiroshi added, and Washu bit down hard on her lip, surveying the glowing form that had spread her arms before them, pitting her translucent body between the ship and Yousai as glittering white blades shone slowly out around her, gaining in density and brightness all the time. Washu narrowed her gaze, slowly counting each blade as it formed to a sharp, ethereal tip, and then she shook her head.

"Eight." She murmured. "Not ten. Eight."

"Eight?" Sakura looked bemused. "Eight what?"

"Spider legs." Hiroshi gulped. "Those *are* the Wing things, right? I don't think she wants to give them back, Masaki-kun, and I think… I think you should let her keep them. I mean, well, she looks like she might go for us, if we get in her way."

"We have to get in her way." Washu said grimly. "She's trying to prevent us getting to Yousai, and we can't not go there, because if we let her divert us from our course, we'll be playing into this Ramia's hands. Takeru did say Sasami was taken ill also, but I didn't imagine

anything like this."

"Sasami-chan." Tenchi struggled to his feet once more, holding tightly to Ryo Ohki's frame as he moved towards the window to join his companions. "What on Earth has happened to her?"

"I think what on *Yousai* has happened to her would be a better remark to make." Washu said quietly. "It doesn't take a genius of my calibre to assume that this is a by-product of Ramia's voodoo. Somehow she's hexed Jurai's Goddess, even from within her tower. Why does she need to go out and do her own dirty work? This is worse than I thought. Ramia's magic is based on soul-catching, and Tsunami is a spirit who is weakened by elemental Arian magic. I'm not sure what of Sasami is out there, Tenchi. I rather think there's more of Ramia's dark arts behind this than our young Princess."

"Then where is Sasami?" Tenchi asked anxiously. "If she's not there… where is she?"

"She's there. I can see her, but she's trapped deep within." Washu said sadly. "There's another surrounding her — a darkness, which I assume is the will of this Ramia. Tsunami is not the gentle soul we know her as, Tenchi. You know what powerful spiritual magic can do to a sane mind. You saw my sister's fate."

"But Tsunami isn't human!" Tenchi objected. "Tsunami is a Goddess!"

"Tsunami is sealed to Jurai's core just as Tokimi sealed herself to Kihaku, Tenchi." Washu shook her head. "She is stronger, and she has always wielded more control, because she had the spiritual magic to connect with Jurai and understand its needs and wants. But deep down, she is as human as you are. She lived, and she chose to bind her life to her World, just as Tokimi chose to bind hers to Kihaku. Sasami is the living proof that Tsunami has a human spirit, after all. But right now, Sasami and Tsunami are still seperated. They have different weaknesses, and different strengths. Sasami is vulnerable to the kind of physical attacks Yugi favoured… but Tsunami is weak against poisoned magic. Remember Kagato and Souja's tree? Remember what Nozomi told you, when she came back to help stop him in his tracks? This is a spell of the same nature. Only the thing we didn't know then was that that was Arian magic, just as this is. And that Kagato was Arian, just like Ramia Saotome."

"I don't pretend I understand any of this." Sakura said softly. "But I don't think we should just hang around here. Ryo Ohki is fast, right? I mean, we've gone stomach-churningly fast before now, so surely she

can outrun this Tsunami creature? We can get away from her, right? I mean… she isn't going to kill us. Is she?"

"I don't know." Washu said darkly. "But turning back isn't an option, is it, Ryo Ohki? I guess we're going to have to try and evade her… somehow."

"*Tenchi Masaki Jurai*."

Before any of her companions could react, a voice echoed through the drive room of the ship, and Tenchi stumbled to his knees once more, clutching at his head with a sudden cry.

"*Yes, I see you, Prince of my planet*." The voice sounded amused, even as Sakura hurried down at her friend's side, slipping an arm around his shoulders.

"Leave him alone!" She exclaimed. "You're meant to be a good person, so prove it!"

"*I have no interest in Earthlings or half-dead princes*." Tsunami's eyes glittered, and the white haze of the Light Hawk Wings seemed to reach closer to the small craft, snaring it in their flare and preventing Ryo Ohki from speeding out of range. The cabbit mewed in protest, and Washu felt vibrations run through the craft, as the ship fought to shake off the snare. "*You are simply in my way, and I don't like that*."

"Tsunami, stop it! This isn't really your will!" Washu exclaimed, but the flare grew brighter as Tsunami let out a cold peal of laughter.

"*Washu Hakubi*." She murmured. "*I remember you. You who blew up your homeworld to bring your own sister to her knees. You mustn't lecture me on betrayal. It seems you're good enough at it yourself, when you put your mind to it*."

"She has Tsunami's memories." Tenchi glanced up in surprise, pain clear on his face as he fought against the Goddess's teasing spell.

"She's a pale imitation of Tsunami. She's not whole, or not yet." Washu said grimly. "I can still see the divisions within her, and there are only eight Light Hawk Wings. Not ten."

"Only, she says." Hiroshi muttered. "I thought Tenchi normally kicked butt with three of the damn things. Why is eight such good news?"

"It's not. But it's better news than it could be." Washu said slowly.

"In what way?"

"Well, when she kills us, she probably won't take out half of the

known universe in the blast."

"*Washu-san*!" Sakura's eyes opened wide with dismay. "Tell me you're kidding! I don't want to die up here, out in space where my family won't even know what happened to me! It's bleak and cold and lonely up here… I don't want to die so far from home!"

At her words, the advancing magic of the Goddess faltered, and Washu saw brief indecision flicker across the woman's face.

"Sakura, keep talking." She murmured. "Something's happening out there… and I think your words struck a divine nerve."

"Huh?" Sakura looked blank.

"I have a hunch… just do it." Washu snapped, and Sakura shrugged, spreading her hands.

"Like it matters what I say if we're going to get blown up, but okay." She said bitterly. "Because I didn't ask to come out here in the middle of nowhere like this. I did it because I wanted to help Tenchi and because I didn't want to get killed by aliens because if I did, my family would be upset and angry and they'd never forgive Jurai or other planets for what had happened. I don't want to hate Jurai and I don't want people on the Earth to, either. I've been there and seen it now, and it's beautiful. But I'm upset. You think it's easy to kill people, don't you? You just blink and brush your stupid Wings over them and that's it, they're gone. Don't you even care that there are people back home who'll wonder and grieve for those people? They might not matter to you, but that doesn't mean they're not important. Jurai might be a beautiful planet, but beauty is only skin deep, you know. Are you all so cold that you don't care about people's families or loved ones back home? If I'm going to die, I want to be there, with them, where I belong! Not up here in space with creatures who don't know how to respect people for who they damn well are!"

A faint tear trickled down Tsunami's cheek, and for an instant, Washu saw Sasami's features glimmer through the Goddess's spectral complexion. The Light Hawk Wings flickered back once more, and she hesitated, as if unsure what to do.

"What's *wrong* with her?" Hiroshi whispered. "Why is she crying? Sakura, I think you just made a God cry — isn't that eternal damnation or something?"

"I don't care." Sakura folded her arms, tears in her own eyes. "She's not my God. I don't care if she cries — she *should* cry. If she can be happy killing people, then she deserves to cry."

“Shh.” Washu rested a hand on her shoulder. “That’s enough. I wanted to see how easy it would be to pull Sasami back out of Tsunami’s heart. The Goddess is still a spirit, Sakura. She doesn’t have those emotions you talk about because her essence is divided and has been since she decided to return to a mortal state. All love, warmth and affection in Tsunami now belongs to Princess Sasami — to create the Goddess’s soul, this was necessary. We’ve seen it in the past, when Sasami’s compassion has overidden Tsunami’s decisive wishes. In fact, I’m here myself to tell you this because of Sasami’s past interference. Sasami is still strong within her, because she heard the words you said. Sasami-chan cares more than anything for her friends and her family. What you said just strengthened her resolve inside of her. She doesn’t want Tsunami to kill anyone… and so long as Sasami is still able to do that, we have a hope of resolving this.”

“I think Ramia’s fighting back, Washu.” Tenchi said softly, gesturing out towards the apparition as a strange goldish veneer encircled her body, surrounding the white blades and giving them an eerie, blood-tinted appearance. “She’s not going to relinquish hold of her prey just because Sakura said something to make Sasami cry. We’re still in trouble… whatever this spell is, it’s strong and it’s controlling Tsunami’s magic and her will.”

“You just take care of yourself, Tenchi.” Washu said frankly. “Ryo Ohki, I’m relying on you to hold your course and don’t deviate. Head straight for the Goddess’s heart, and don’t be afraid to fly through her. She’s Tsunami right now, and she has no physical form. I’m going to try to encircle the ship in a forcefield and while she’s weakened and distracted, we’re going to try to get to Yousai. We can’t go around her, so we’ll have to go through her.”

“That’s nuts!” Hiroshi exclaimed. “We can’t go through her! She’s a Goddess!”

“Well, I’m too old to worry about things like that, and anyway, I’ve always been more of a scientific person than a spiritual one, so I suppose I’m already damned.” Washu said flippantly, placing her palms squarely on the ship’s control panel. “All right, Ryo Ohki. I’m leaving it up to you now… I need your help.”

Ryo Ohki yowled in agreement, firing up her engines as she set her course for Tsunami’s body, and Washu closed her eyes, focusing all her strength on encircling the craft in a bright shield of her own. The light of it glittered through the windows, dazzling the occupants and making it impossible to see their opponant, but Ryo Ohki jolted back suddenly, Washu’s shield faltering slightly as a blaze of white-gold

light assailed them, knocking them right off course.

"*You can't stop me so easily, you fools*." Tsunami's voice echoed through the ship once more. "*Your silly games don't work on me. I am stronger than all of you and I will destroy you*."

A second barrage buffeted against Ryo Ohki and the cabbit let out a wounded howl, her crystals flickering red and white alternately as she struggled to stay on course. Washu took a deep breath, struggling to maintain her own forcefield against the strength of the attacks, knowing even as she did so that it was not Tsunami's magic she was deflecting, but that of the mage Ramia, trapped on the planet below.

"If Tsunami hit me like that with the full force of her magic, there wouldn't just be no more Ryo Ohki." She muttered to herself, sweat beading her brow as she redoubled her efforts. "There'd likely be no more Yousai and no more surrounding solar system, either. Whatever Ramia says about it, she doesn't have Tsunami fully under her control. And that being the case, we must be able to stop it somehow. Mustn't we? I refuse to have come through so much just to die at the hands of a dark Arian mage!"

Almost as soon as the words left her lips, the barrage suddenly stopped, and from somewhere outside the ship Washu was aware of a wide-spreading pulse of magic, sweeping across space and flowing over Ryo Ohki's battered form like water over a rock on the river's bed. A series of light bursts came in quick succession, and then, as quickly as they'd come, the sky was dark and black around them once more, all the more silent and ghostly for the suddenness of it.

Slowly Washu lowered her shield, prepared to raise it again in a split second if it was a trap, but Tsunami was nowhere to be seen. Where the Goddess had been, another figure hovered, body surrounded in blue energy, her silver hair glinting in the dim light of the Yousai sun. She had her back to them, but as Ryo Ohki drew closer she turned, and as Ryo Ohki called up a clearer image on her screen, Washu let out an exclamation, surprise flooding through her as she laid eyes on the woman's face.

"*Najya*?" She exclaimed.

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Well, so it hadn't been a dream.

Misao rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling of her chamber as she fought with her emotions. Unwillingly her memory flitted back to the events of the previous afternoon, and the troubled, haunted night's sleep that had brought her little respite. A man lay dead, this she knew, and by her hand.

"And yet nobody seems to be angry with me. I think that makes it worse." She murmured, glancing at her hands as she let out a heavy sigh. "I know Lord Tennan spoke to Lord Oshima in some detail, but he didn't mention it to me at all when he came to say good night yesterday evening. Somehow it was surreal — I didn't like it. Like it didn't matter to him — as if he was trying to pretend it wasn't there. Just like… just like they all do, with my mother… pretend she's not there, and all of it will go away."

She groaned, hauling her stiff body up into a sitting position and crossing her legs in front of her as she surveyed the discarded outfit that lay tossed aside in the furthermost corner of her room. The hem was still stained with Yurikage's blood, and yet somehow Misao had been unable to rid herself of it entirely.

"Misa's outfit." She murmured. "The garb of an assassin. But how much am *I* to blame for all of this? Was Ryoko-san right, when she spoke to me about needing my help? Is there anything I can do to help? She was… she was kind to me, as if she understood. Not like Lord Oshima — he just pretended nothing was wrong. But Ryoko-san… wasn't afraid of what had happened. And yet she still didn't shout at me. I wish I knew what to do now. I'm a useless Lady of Yousai and that's for sure. Even if I wasn't in control of my body when Lord Motonoya was attacked, I still… I was still weak enough for my mother to take advantage. So perhaps it is my fault, for being feeble and scared. If I was like Sasami… maybe things would have turned out differently. As it is…"

She sighed, getting to her feet and moving to the window of her chamber. She had shut herself inside the previous evening, after she had returned from Tsunami's shrine, and even though many had tried to enter, she had allowed noone to see her except for the briefest of

moments, when her guardian had murmured good-night and kissed her gently on the brow. She had always looked up to him like a father, and yet now she felt a gulf growing between them.

“I can’t stay up here.” She decided, staring miserably out at the landscape. “All I do is dwell on Lord Motonoya’s murder, and on Rumiya betraying me. I wish Sasami was well, so I could talk to her. As it is, I am alone… and I don’t like it. Coming to terms with what I’ve done — can I? Will I ever? Ryoko-san said it wasn’t my fault, and that instead of blaming myself I should do something to avenge him. But I… I don’t know if I’m strong enough to even try. I don’t know where this magic is inside of me and I don’t want to be Misa again. Who knows what I might do, if I’m not strong enough to fight off her evil ways?”

She grabbed her cloak from it’s hook, wrapping it tightly around her shoulders as she pushed open the door of her chamber, peering cautiously out to make sure there was noone there to stop her. A guard on duty at the end of the hall saluted her, but she took no notice of him, hurrying down the narrow passageways and down the steep, winding stairwell that led to the bottom floor of the Council complex. Beyond the carefully gilted doors, she knew, lay the Council’s own secret shrine to Tsunami, and she put her hands against the grain of the wood, knowing as she did so that the doors had been carved from blessed trees. They vibrated gently under her touch, as if understanding her pain, and then, very slowly, they slid back, allowing her entrance to the shrine beyond.

Carefully Misao stepped inside, and the door rumbled shut behind her, fastening itself with an almost silent click. She hesitated for a moment, then gathered her resolve, crossing the floor to the alcove which led, she knew, to the ante-chamber beyond. She had only been here once or twice before, as the shrine was a priveleged place for members of the Council and until now, she had been too young to gain access on her own. But, she reminded herself, now she was thirteen and they wanted to make her Lady of Yousai. That being so, she had as much right to be anywhere she wanted — and besides, she knew that this was where they had brought Lord Motonoya’s corpse.

The servants of the shrine had done a careful, thorough job of cleaning and preparing his body, and as Misao moved tentatively towards the stone bier, she saw that the blood that had seemed so plentiful when he had fallen was now nowhere in evidence. He lay white and still, dressed in fine, clean-pressed formal robes, almost sleeping, and there was a look of peace on his face. Somehow this strangely comforted the young girl and she found fresh courage,

edging forwards as she placed her hands tentatively against his arm.

“I’m so very sorry, Lord Motonoya.” She murmured, taking in the neatly bound tail of thick golden hair that wound over his left shoulder. “You came to Yousai in peace, and I never meant for this to happen. I… I wish I could have stopped it, but really, I… I never meant to kill you. I’m so sorry… Tsunami forgive me for what I’ve done!”

“That’s a heartfelt plea, Lady Misao.”

Seiryo’s voice startled her and she spun around, her hand flying to her chest at the sight of him. She took a step back from the body, hesitation and wariness in her aqua eyes, but the nobleman held up his hands, shaking his head slowly.

“I of all people know what it is to be bewitched into committing a heinous act.” He said softly. “Ryoko-sama has told me that you were not yourself, when you attacked Lord Yurikage. I’m not going to hurt you, Misao-sama. The blame is not all with you, after all. But I am surprised to find you here. Of all places, I would have thought this is the last place you’d want to be.”

“It is, but that’s why I came.” Misao bit her lip. “What do you mean, Lord Tennan? How do you know what it feels like, to be used as someone else’s weapon?”

“Powerful forces use others to do their dirty work, and sometimes we’re not strong enough to overcome them.” Seiryo said vaguely. “I was once induced to attack and kill someone, because of something she had discovered. Fortunately for me, she was strong enough to overcome it… but I know what you are feeling now, better than you think I do. Believe me, wherever there is a position of authority, there will always be dark elements who seek to overwhelm it.”

“I suppose.” Misao said slowly. “Lord Tennan, Lady Ryoko… she said to me that… that I should fight back. Do you think she’s right? Do you think I… I should? Or will I wind up making things worse? You see, I… I’m so scared of being Misa again, and I don’t know what to do! Misa is decisive and she isn’t easily scared. But she… she has no restraint. She does bad things. And… and…”

She trailed off, chewing hard on on her bottom lip as she fought against a sudden flood of tears, and Seiryo pursed his lips.

“I think that is a decision only the Lady of Yousai can make.” He said at length. “It is your planet, your people, and your choice, in the end. We are here and we will remain here so long as your witch

Ramia continues to harm Lady Sasami… but whether we can stop her or not, I don't know. And whether you can help us — I don't know that, either."

"Despite everything, you've all been kind to me." Misao said sadly. "Even… even Lord Motonoya."

She turned back towards the silent body, eying him for a moment, then, "The last thing he said to me, before he saw me become Misa, was that you'd all do what you could to prevent me from getting hurt. And when… when Rumiya came, to… to bewitch me, Yurikage-sama tried to protect me. I feel so awful, Lord Tennan. Will that ever go away? Am I always going to feel like a murderer, for the rest of time?"

"I'm actually quite glad to see your remorse so plainly on your face, although I understand that you don't want to keep feeling it." Seiryo leant back against the wall of the chamber, eying her pensively. "What you do with it is up to you."

"What… what did *you* do? When you… the person… what choice did you make?"

"Ah." Seiryo's face broke into a rueful smile, and he shook his head. "The lady in question was good enough to forgive me, and I would even dare to call her a good friend, these days. We overcame our differences — and found that we had common ground."

"I don't have that option." Misao looked sad. "Lord Motonoya… doesn't have the chance to forgive me."

"No, but I think he would have done, had he understood fully what had happened." Seiryo said thoughtfully. "He was foolish, sometimes, and far too open with his emotions. Rash and careless, perhaps, and I should have done more to curb it in him, I suppose. But he was not malicious. And if he had known that you were under a spell, he would not have blamed you. Silly as he could be, he was not a grudge-bearing man."

"Do you think Tsunami will bless his soul?" Misao asked hesitantly. Seiryo sighed, rubbing his temples.

"I'm not the best person to ask about spiritual matters." He said succinctly. "Since my experience with dark magic, I've steered well clear of as much of it as possible. But right now, I don't even know where Lady Sasami is. I came down here on the offchance that Tsunami had been driven to visit her own shrines, but so far I've had no luck in tracking her down. I don't suppose you've seen her, have you?"

"No." Misao looked startled. "She's missing?"

"She had an… episode, in her chamber." Seiryo nodded. "From Kamidake's account, it looks like Ramia has moved her attentions from you to bigger game — to Tsunami herself. Kamidake said that Sasami-hime took control somehow and dragged Tsunami away before she could do any real harm. But now noone knows where she is — it's like she's vanished completely."

"I… I see." Misao looked troubled. "This is all *my* fault, isn't it?"

"How so, my Lady?"

"That's just it." Misao kicked idly at a stray shard of coffin stone, watching it skim across the paved floor. "I'm *not* a Lady. Not a proper one. If I had been, none of this would have happened at all."

"Well, the past is done and can't be changed." Seiryo said frankly. "So let's not worry too much about it at the moment. Lady Misao, I think you should consider Ryoko-sama's request very carefully. It might be that there is something you can do — however small — that might help turn the balance."

"But…" Misao hesitated, and Seiryo rested a hand on her shoulder.

"You want to help Princess Sasami, don't you?" He murmured, and Misao stared at him, startled. She nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "I… I do. So I'll do as you say. I'll think it over. Only… do you think I can be alone with… with Lord Yurikage for a while, please? I want to say… say prayers for him, and I'd rather noone else was there."

Seiryo smiled, nodding his head.

"Of course." He agreed gently. "Yours will mean more than mine, given that I don't have much use for the gesture in general. Besides, my duty is to find the Princess, and see her safe. But do give consideration to my words as well as those of Ryoko-sama. If you want to be a true Lady of Yousai, it would be as well to learn from this experience, and begin now."

With that he bowed towards her, withdrawing from the chamber, and Misao sighed, turning her gaze back on the still form of the slain nobleman.

"Learn from it, he says." She murmured, even as she flickered her fingers, pushing her hands together in prayer for the dead man's soul. "Well, I can try. And I suppose… I suppose I can start by not being so afraid of everything. I mean, right now I'm scared, more than I've ever

been. But bad things have happened already, because I've let myself be scared. Somehow… somehow I have to try and be brave, like Sasami is. I don't know how, but there must be a way. I can't be completely weak, can I? And surely, if I'm stronger… surely then, my mother can't make me become Misa again. And I can't hurt anyone else!"

Buoyed by this hope, she completed her prayers, bowing soberly to Yurikage before turning on her heel, hastening out of the chamber and back up the steps towards the main hallway.

"I'm going to find Lady Ryoko." She decided, even as she darted from corridor to corridor, ignoring all who she passed on the way as she focused on her decision. "She's strong, and she seemed to understand. Plus, she's a Saotome, too. And… and I need help. I'm going to find her… maybe she can tell me how I can be strong against the magic of my mother!"

"I think you have some explaining to do, Dr Akara."

As Ryo Ohki hovered impatiently in space, not far from Yousai's orbit, Washu ushered the stranger aboard, standing back to regard her keenly as the other woman did as she was bidden, carefully removing her cape and folding it over her arm as she did so. "It's been a long time, and I had thought you were dead. Why is it that you happen to be here, in space, just in the nick of time to help us out? It seems a little bit convenient, I have to admit."

"Washu." The newcomer's red eyes softened, and she held out her hands, taking Washu's fingers in hers and squeezing them tightly. "Oh, and I was so sure you had died too. When I saw Kihaku… it's so good to see you. It's been too long — too long for us both."

"You know this woman, Washu?" Tenchi eyed Najya warily. "An old friend?"

"Yes. A very old friend." Washu turned, nodding her head. "We worked together once before, at the Science Academy. Tenchi, Sakura, Hiroshi — this is Dr Najya Akara, one of the brightest and friendliest scientists I ever had the fortune to share a chamber with. We studied the Dark Heart of Jurai together, although it transpired that both of us developed ulterior motives and unhealthy interest in Kagato before our time there was done."

"Yes, that's true." Najya looked regretful. "Still, it was fun while it lasted. I would say I missed you, my friend, except that I haven't exactly been missing anything for a while. I've not been around for

some years, in fact… I was drawn here by the same thing I imagine you were. Kagato's kin-magic, and my family's old blood-rivals, the Saotome."

"Yes, I rather thought that might be it." Washu gestured for her companion to sit down, and Najya did so, crossing her legs neatly beneath her as she cast Tenchi and the gaping earthlings warm smiles. "Tenchi, Sakura, Hiroshi. They're new names to me, but then I know I've been away a long time. I don't suppose they'd be acquaintances I'd know, would they, Washu?"

"No, but Tenchi is the grandson of Prince Yosho, Lord Azusa's troublesome son and heir." Washu said playfully. "Sakura and Hiroshi are friends of his from the planet Yosho ended up on — planet Earth."

"Then it truly has been too long." Najya stretched, stifling a yawn. "And I'm drained. I'm still not used to waging this kind of magic… it takes some getting used to."

"Excuse me." Hiroshi held up his hands. "But what just happened? One minute some scary Goddess with a split personality problem was about to blow us to bits — and the next thing we're being saved by some woman in a gossamer cape who just happens to know Ryoko's mother? Will someone please fill in the gaps for me? I'm floundering and I'm sure I'm not the only one."

"No, I think the same goes for me, too." Tenchi admitted. "I'm sure I've heard your name before, Dr Akara. But I'm not quite sure why or where."

"You can call me Najya. It's all right. No formality among friends of Washu's." Najya's eyes twinkled. "But wait, did you say mother? Washu, you have a family? *Children*? Oh, I'm so glad! After Mikamo died, I wasn't sure…"

"We'll discuss that later." Washu held up her hands, shaking her head briskly. "Not now. This is more important."

"Yes, you're probably right." Najya sighed, inclining her head slightly. "And I'm sorry I gatecrashed your party like I did. I didn't know this was your ship, Washu. I've been travelling through space for a few days now, following the flare of Saotome magic. This is where it lead me, to the grotesque parody of Jurai's Goddess that attacked you."

"Parody?" Washu pursed her lips. "You realise that she wasn't fully Tsunami then, too?"

"Clearly. She reeked of Saotome dark magic." Najya wrinkled up

her nose. “Getting that smell out of my cape is going to take time and effort, I’ll tell you. Besides, if she really had been Tsunami, I wouldn’t exactly have been much of an opponant for her. She’d have brushed me aside like a leaf. My sister Aya told me that Ramia of the Saotome was imprisoned on this Yousai planet, and that explains her weakness. If she’s confined, no doubt her spell isn’t so strong as she’d like it to be, especially so far into space as this. I was able to push her back only because she’d forced herself into Tsunami to make her obey her will. It was strange, really. I would have thought that she’d know better than to risk herself that way — unless she felt it was the only way to maintain control.”

“Tsunami’s soul isn’t conquered.” Washu said softly. “She knows it, and so do we. That’s all.”

“Well, to be honest, I was surprised to actually *see* Tsunami at all.” Najya admitted. “Truthfully, I didn’t think she ever left Jurai’s core. To meet her in open space was a bit of a novelty. I’m still reeling.”

“So let me get this straight.” Sakura said slowly. “You’re a scientist and a witch? Like Washu-san?”

“I’m a mage. Not a witch. And I’m sure Washu wouldn’t like to be called a witch, either.” Najya shook her head. “The Akara mage, to be specific.”

“So that’s where I’ve heard your name before.” Tenchi murmured. “It all makes sense, now.”

“I’m glad it does to someone.” Hiroshi muttered. “For those of us with less insider information, can I have a translation please?”

“When we went to see that woman on Jurai, Washu mentioned the name Akara. A powerful Arian family, that’s what she said.” Sakura remembered. “Is that who you belong to, Najya-san? Are you from that family?”

“Yes.” Najya looked surprised. “You pay attention well. That’s right.”

“But Airai is the planet full of nutjobs, right?” Hiroshi asked. “The one where this mad witch who wants to kill people came from?”

“Yes and no.” Washu smothered a smile at Hiroshi’s blunt analysis. “It’s not that simple. There are a lot of magical cults on Airai. And not all of them practice black magic. Some, like Najya’s people, are white mages. They don’t use their power to curse or control people. Rather they use it to heal and help — and I know that when Najya and I met on Jurai, it was her hope then to improve relations between her world

and that one by proving not all Arians were heathen witches."

"Very true." Najya looked rueful. "Unfortunately the Prince we were there to work for turned out to have sworn his soul to Saotome dark magic and that was the end of that. Washu and I parted ways and I didn't know what had happened to her. Me, I was pursued back to Airai by his hangers on, so I took the only step I could to protect my family. I stilled my heart and sealed myself in the Akara crypt, so that they wouldn't pursue me or my people any more."

"You mean you… died?" Sakura whitened. "And then came back to life?"

"I slept." Najya shook her head. "That's all. And when I sensed the surge of Saotome magic, it woke me. My father was the head of the Akara family when I put myself to sleep, but he… he died two years ago, and I inherited his mantle. Now I am the Akara mage, just as Ramia is the Saotome one. And as ever, we're likely to clash once more."

"Did you come here to kill Ramia, Najya?" Washu asked baldly. Najya started, then she frowned.

"Maybe." She owned. "If there is no other option."

"Then I'm glad we've seen you before you had a chance." Washu rested a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Because Ramia has a daughter — a little girl of thirteen years old. And if your father's magic passed from him to you…"

"I didn't know that." Najya's expression darkened. "You're right. Such dark magic would overwhelm a child and destroy her very soul."

"Well, since we're all heading to Yousai, we should move before Tsunami — or Ramia — or whoever it is gathers herself and comes back." Tenchi suggested. "You said Ryoko is down there. Maybe she's found out something more."

"Very likely." Washu agreed grimly. "All right, that's what we'll do. Ryo Ohki, take us down to the surface, and be careful not to frighten anyone. We don't know where Tsunami is, or whether Ramia or Sasami currently has control over her actions. So be careful, all right? Be on your guard."

Ryo Ohki let out a yowl of agreement, beginning the descent to the planet below, and Sakura sighed.

"I hope this is going to be all right." She murmured. "I really meant what I said before… about not dying up here."

“Noone is going to die, Sakura.” Tenchi said firmly, but Sakura shook her head.

“You struggle even to stand up and you make statements like that?” She demanded. “Don’t be silly, Tenchi. This isn’t a game, is it? It’s not a happy ever after adventure or a fun packed trip into outer space. This is life and death — real life and death — and we’re in the middle of it. Aren’t we?”

Washu was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, she nodded her head.

“Yes.” She said gravely. “I’m afraid so. And none of us really know how it will turn out… not yet. Just try to hang in there, Sakura. If there’s any way to keep you from harm, believe me, I’ll do my best. And you have my word — if it’s in my power to bring everyone safely back to the Earth at the end of the day, then I’ll do it.”

She sighed.

“Whatever it takes.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

Kill the Space Pirate and Misao would be free.

Rumiya flew across the city skyline, repeating the words to himself over and over again as his keen, beady gaze sought out his target among the streets below. Though fear and apprehension ran through him, he knew that he had no choice. If Lady Misao was to have a chance of escaping Ramia's curse, then he had to do as he had been instructed… no matter what his own fate.

"After all, I'm practically dead anyway." He muttered, swooping lower as he hunted for any sign of his prey. "I have no idea whether or not I can actually slay her, or if I'm even strong enough. I almost wonder if Lady Ramia sent me on this mission to see me killed, and then she can backtrack on her word to me. And yet, what choice do I have? So long as she holds both Misao-sama and I in her box of souls, we're both her puppets. Even if Misao-sama doesn't think so, it's still the truth. Perhaps Lady Ramia can't use her hex to kill her daughter like she could me, and did her husband… but while she has control of Tsunami, Misao-sama's life is in danger and if I can do anything to prevent her from crying again, I will. She already hates me. It won't matter if she sees blood on my hands, after all."

This decided, he landed carefully on the perimeter fencing of the Council grounds, gazing out across them as he heard the sound of voices. Instinctively he tensed, hopping along the rail so that he was hidden behind the leafy bough of a tall, old tree. He watched as he saw his target step into view, one of Jurai's Knights in attendance. Both wore grave expressions, and Rumiya felt a pang of guilt as he surveyed them.

"Their friend's body is not yet cold and I must spill blood from another of Lady Sasami's allies." He murmured. "No, Rumiya! This is no time for weakness. You have your orders and you must obey. But you can't take them both on. Think!"

He frowned, rubbing his head absently against the tree bark as he considered his options. Then he froze, as realisation surged through him.

"Well, separating them is easy." He murmured. "Ryoko can fly, can

she not? I'll lure her into a trap — I'll play the decoy, and then when we're quite alone, I'll turn on her. That has to work — it's my only chance. I know this planet better than anyone, and it's my advantage. I'll lead her a merry dance and then, when she least expects it, I'll finish her off nice and quickly. And then… and then I will make Lady Ramia keep her word to me. Somehow I'll make her release her hold over Lady Misao, and then everything will be all right for her."

To think was to act, and he spread his wings, feathers fluttering to the ground as he launched himself from his hiding place, sending up a bevy of combative caws. At the sudden intrusion, both pirate and knight gazed upwards, consternation crossing their faces as they registered the presence of the young serving boy, wheeling and swooping over their heads in a determined, defiant arc.

"There he is!" Ryoko reacted immediately, reaching up a hand to grab at him, but Rumiya pecked at her fingers, lifting himself out of her grip. "Rumiya, you come down here and you answer some questions right now! I've been looking for you all morning — are you so much of a coward that you've been hiding up in the trees with all the other little birdies?"

Rumiya swooped at her again, this time taking a nip out of her arm and she cursed, swatting at him.

"You want trouble, do you?" She demanded. "Well, you got it. I don't like your attitude, and I don't like what you did to poor Misao. We're going to have words, bird-boy, you and me. About Karasu, Haki and what exactly is going on in that tower over by the sea. Do you hear me? I'm not going to lose track of you this time."

"Ryoko, be careful." Her companion put a hand on her arm. "He seems very keen to see you — almost as if he's been looking for you, one way or another. It might be a trap — why else would he spring so suddenly out into the open?"

"Trap or not, I can handle him." Ryoko said flatly. "One thing I am good at, Azaka, is fighting my corner. Don't worry about me. You continue the search for Sasami and I'll be back as soon as I get what I want to know out of this little creep. Washu and the others aren't far from Yousai's orbit now — I just took a signal from Ryo Ohki — so the cavalry are about to arrive. They might be able to help you more, so you should find Seiryo and Kamidake and make sure they know what's going on."

"All right. But take care." Azaka cautioned quietly. "He looks like he means business, and even if he is just a boy, he is on the errand of

a witch."

"Memo noted." Ryoko said grimly, gazing up at Rumiya who issued one more taunting caw before swooping upwards towards the clouds. As he reached a higher altitude, he turned to see if the pirate was following him, and was both gratified and fearful to see her launch herself in his direction, amber light glittering around her finger-tips.

"If it wasn't for the fact I want answers from you, I'd probably fry you!" She exclaimed. "You're not going to escape me, so you might as well not try. You know, the Juraians really don't like people who commit treason against their royal family. I'd say you're already in pretty deep — and you're only making it deeper the more you run away!"

Rumiya chose not to respond, instead altering his course violently as he shot off across the landscape towards the edge of Shinoshi and the tree-filled, overgrown scrubland that marked the boundary of the settlement. Behind him he could hear Ryoko curse, but she kept on his trail, and Rumiya flew on, confident now at least that the pirate would follow him wherever he chose to go.

"And the best place is just outside the city." He murmured. "Beyond Tsunami's shrine, in the alcove where we used to pick berries in the summer months. It's impossible to escape from there so very easily — a natural boundary, and the wall that protected my people from attack. If she's kin of Princess Sasami, and the child of the Dark Prince Kagato, she's as good as Juraian, anyway. She must be weakened by Ramia-sama's spell on Tsunami, even if she does have Arian blood and even if she isn't succumbing quite so much as the others. Maybe this will be easier than I thought — and either way, there's no going back now."

As he reached his destination, he set neatly down onto the ground, spreading his wings as he morphed back into his human form. Ryoko landed daintily opposite him, light still glittering from her fingers as she surveyed him thoughtfully.

"So it is true. Yurikage was right about you." She said softly. "You were the bird — the one who was with Haki, and the one who helped turn poor Misao into an assassin against her will. I hope you have a good explanation for your behaviour. Seiryo said you were heathen, but then Juraians call anyone from outside their borders that. I didn't think he meant you were a savage, too."

Despite himself, Rumiya flinched at the sarcasm in her tones, but he met her gaze bravely, folding his arms across his chest.

“I don’t have a choice in what I do.” He said softly. “You can think what you like of me, and I don’t care. I have to do the things I’m told to do. That’s all. You wouldn’t understand, so there’s no need to insult me so readily. Lord Tennan is mistaken. Not being Jurai-born doesn’t make me a savage.”

“No, inducing a young girl to slay an innocent man makes you a savage. Working for a dark witch locked in a black tower makes you a savage.” Ryoko shot back, and as Rumiya watched, light glittered and shone around her fingers, flaring out into a long, amber sabre. “I’m no more Jurai-born than you are. If anything, I’m Kii — my father’s heritage means nothing to me, either Juraian or Arian. But I don’t involve children in blood-battles. That’s a matter of pirate honour that any pirate worth her salt recognises. And fortunately for you, I don’t *kill* children, either. So how about we have a nice little chat instead? Because I want to know everything there is about this Ramia person and what she’s trying to achieve. All right?”

“I won’t tell you anything about Lady Ramia.” Rumiya said coldly, shaking his head. “Except that she sent me to kill you, and I intend to do as she says. If you won’t kill me, you’re at a disadvantage… I won’t hold back just because you feel you have to. You ought to know that now.”

“What exactly are you going to do to me? Peck me to death?” Ryoko raised her eyebrow. “I’m so scared. Stop this nonsense already, will you? Just because I won’t kill you doesn’t mean I won’t give you a few bruises if you insist on causing me trouble — so you’d better not think I’m a soft touch. I’m no pampered noble of Jurai, not like Yurikage Motonoya was. I’m a pirate and I fight like one, too. Haki trained me, raised me, taught me pretty much everything I know about that life. So don’t think I’m weak, just because I share Lady Sasami’s bloodline. Believe me, I’m not. And sometimes it can hurt a lot more if you *don’t* kill someone… trust me on that.”

Rumiya’s eyes narrowed in determination and he flexed his fingers, producing a long-bladed knife from the belt of his tunic as he charged towards her, uttering an ear-splitting battle-cry as he launched himself upon her. At first taken by surprise at his assault, Ryoko faltered, but as the blade slashed against the skin of her arm she flared her forcefield around her body, pushing her attacker back onto the ground.

“I told you. It’s not in your interests to fight me, if all you have is a knife.” She said softly.

“Not quite all.” Rumiya replied flatly, gripping hold of the blade

more tightly as he charged at her again, but this time, before he made contact with her skin, he stopped dead, meeting her gaze instead. Ryoko blinked at him, staring back as she tried to work out what he was doing, and a slight smile touched Rumiya's lips.

"My people have lived on this planet far longer than the Shizukasari, or the invading Juraians." He murmured, his tones soft and soothing as despite herself, Ryoko's concentration began to waver. "We're a very ancient people, and we possess certain tribal gifts that the Shizukasari neither understand or wield. I am a shape-shifter, you already know that. I was born under the native sun sign of the bird, so I can become a parrot at will — whenever I choose to change my form, all I have to do is think it and it becomes reality. I'm trained with a blade — Lord Oshima saw to it that I was able to defend myself in case it should be needed. But my people have another gift. The gift of persuasion, Ryoko-san. Hypnotic persuasion. How do you think I brought Misa out of Lady Misao's gentle soul? It wasn't her will that she changed, or that her true Arian self was woken up inside of her. That was my doing. And right now, I'm looking deep into your soul as well. Very deep, Ryoko-san. Deep enough to make you drop your guard and submit to me. You won't fight any longer — or any harder. Even if Ramia-sama is right, and you do have Saotome blood, you said yourself that you deny that part of your heritage. That means that like Misao-sama, you have nothing to protect you against my advances. Your magic is weak and so are you. I don't need to slice you open with my blade in fair combat. You will fall and I will slit your throat. I don't need to do anything else. You are already under my suggestion — and when I step away, you will fall to your knees before me."

Ryoko's forcefield flickered and died, as a faintly glazed look began to enter her eyes, and Rumiya's smile widened.

"That's it. Good girl." He murmured, stepping forward as he touched the pirate's good arm, guiding her down onto the ground before him. He rested his hand on her shoulder, holding his blade tightly in his other fist as he brought it closer to her neck. "You see, you shouldn't charge into a battle you don't understand. My people's power is very strong. How do you think we have lived so long in peace beside other cultures and peoples? We drive them away with our suggestion, and prevent them from causing us harm. Thanks to Lady Ramia, I've learnt to hone and strengthen my own gifts. And strong as you might be, you are not able to resist my spell."

He pushed the blade up against the pale skin of her throat, hesitating for a moment as he cast a glance over the stiff, unresponsive body of his opponant. A stab of regret washed through

him, and he bit his lip, his grip tightening once more on the dagger.

“Forgive me, Ryoko-san.” He murmured. “I only do this to protect Lady Misao.”

“Then you’ll have to do better, won’t you?” A sudden flash of amber energy sent the weapon flying out of his hand, clattering against the sheer rock face behind them, and Rumiya gazed at Ryoko in horror as she gripped him tightly around the wrists, meeting his gaze with a dark one of her own. “Do you really think I’m that feeble? Don’t be stupid.”

“But you were… you were…” Rumiya stammered, his focus broken by the suddenness of his companion’s revival, and Ryoko snorted, getting to her feet.

“No, I wasn’t. I just wanted to hear you talk.” She said frankly. “Did noone ever tell you that dropping your guard around a pirate is always a bad idea? Now you see why.”

“Let go of me!”

“Not a chance. I told you, I want some answers.” Ryoko’s eyes narrowed, and Rumiya returned her gaze with a defiant one of his own. For a moment there was silence, then Ryoko’s expression softened.

“You know, you don’t strike me as a true assassin.” She said pensively, the confrontational tone gone from her voice as she surveyed his young features. “You are just a boy, when all is said and done. If you’re so determined to kill me, Rumiya, why apologise so sincerely before slitting my throat? What do you think you’re protecting Misao from? Because right now, she’d quite happily see you burn alive for all your involvement in this. She’s not happy with you… why do you believe you need to protect her? Do you think that I’ll go after her, because of what happened to Lord Motonoya? Because I won’t. Noone will. We don’t blame her for his death. We blame that bitch in the dark tower.”

Rumiya flinched, finally managing to wrench his wrists free of her grasp.

“I can’t tell you anything and I won’t!” He exclaimed, darting across the ground to where the dagger had fallen and scooping it up in his hands. “I have to kill you, that’s all that matters. Nothing else is important, and once you’re dead, you won’t care why anything is happening, anyway.”

“Oh, not this again.” Ryoko sighed, flexing her fingers as her

forcefield reformed around her body. “Rumiya, you’re not strong enough to kill me. I admit you have guts, and you obviously feel this is something you need to get out of your system. But you’re wasting your time. You can’t break through my forcefield, and I’m just not susceptible to your hypnotism. I’ve had much, much more experience of fighting far more dangerous opponants than you. I helped to imprison Haki in the same sealed location that you helped to free him from. Do you really think that you’d stand a chance, when all is said and done?”

“I might. You never know.” Rumiya said flatly. “So fight me, and we’ll find out.”

“Well, happy campers, this is our stop.”

Washu let out a heavy sigh, stretching her arms over her head as Ryo Ohki dropped neatly down onto the Yousai landing bay. She uttered a yowl of relief, beaming the tired and travel-weary group down onto the smooth tarmacked surface before glimmering and morphing herself into her cabbit form. She flopped down onto her stomach, uttering a plaintive mew, and Tenchi stooped to pick her up, rifling his fingers gently through her fur.

“You look like I feel. You’ve done a lot of flying recently, Ryo-Ohki. Thank you.” He murmured. “I know you’re still bruised from Haki’s attack on you, so it was real brave of you to bring us all this way.”

“Are you all right, Tenchi-kun?” Sakura shot him an anxious glance. “You still look strange — pale and not yourself.”

“I’ll live. I can walk.” Tenchi said with a rueful smile. “And if Ryoko is here, then… Ryo-Ohki? What’s got into you, you crazy creature?” As at the sound of the pirate’s name, Ryo Ohki suddenly seemed to find her second wind, leaping up onto his shoulder and pawing agitatedly at his ear, mewing insistently. Washu frowned, holding out her hands to the cabbit and Ryo Ohki hopped daintily from one perch to the other, rubbing her head against Washu’s skin as she sought to convey her message. The gem flickered for a moment, then faded to dull red, and Washu pursed her lips.

“Ryoko is definitely here.” She said slowly. “I think… I think she’s run into some trouble. For a moment there, I think Ryo Ohki was worried about her again.”

“And now?” Tenchi looked apprehensive.

“I think that we should find out what’s going on on the bigger scale

before we worry too much about Ryoko." Washu said frankly. "One thing I do know is that my girl can take care of herself, and probably anyone who's stupid enough to launch an attack on her. Ryo Ohki, you'll tell us if Ryoko's life is in real danger, won't you? Otherwise, well, I think we need to act with caution. We're strangers here, and we've already had one unpleasant experience before we even landed. I don't want to draw bad attention to our presence, not until I'm more sure of what's going on."

"That makes sense." Najya nodded her head. "Although it will be hard to conceal my presence from Ramia, now we've landed. I can sense her power flickering and waning all around this place. I'm sure she must feel my presence here too. I don't know who I pushed back in space — whether it was Ramia or the Lady Tsunami's consciousness — but either way, Ramia is probably expecting trouble. We are, you might say, deathly blood-foes. Our peoples have been at war for years."

"So what you're saying is that if we stick too close to you, we might get blown into bite-size cabbit-food." Hiroshi groaned. "Great. Thanks."

"It's awfully quiet in here." Sakura shivered, pulling her jacket more tightly around her shoulders as a cold wind whipped through the docking bay. "Why is there noone here? Why are there no guards or… or anything? On Jurai, there were people watching the place where we landed. But here… there's noone."

"That's true." Washu looked surprised, glancing around her. "There are no guards. You're right, Sakura. It is strange."

"Or a trap." Tenchi rubbed his temples. "I want to find Sasami and I want to find Ryoko. Washu, my headache is getting slowly worse, so I'm sure that Sasami is weakening. I don't know how I know that, but I'm sure that it's the case."

"Right now you're in no state to face her." Washu said softly. "I know how you feel, Tenchi… Sasami and Ryoko are important to me, also. But let's not jump the gun. One thing at a time. The first thing we need to do is find a way out of the landing bay — and then we'll worry about the next step, after that."

"I suppose." Tenchi bit his lip, and Washu sent him a sympathetic smile.

"I know." She repeated. "But it's the only thing we can do, until we know more. Romio told us a lot, Tenchi, but this is an alien world to all of us. And we don't know what to expect."

“I think the way out is that way.” Hiroshi raised a hand to the left, squinting through his glasses as he tried to make out the unfamiliar scripting. “I’m not sure what the words mean, but I’m sure I saw some of them over the landing bay when we arrived on Jurai.”

“Well remembered.” Washu looked impressed. “And well spotted. This way then. And keep on your guard, everyone. Najya, you might want to cover yourself up, so that it’s not immediately clear that you’re not a native. Your appearance is very distinctive, and your magic almost makes you glow in this light… there’s no reason to raise any alarms unduly. You and I are the best defence any of us have at the moment, so we have to be ready for anything.”

Ryo Ohki let out an indignant squeal and Washu laughed, absently petting the creature as she settled herself on her creator’s shoulder.

“Oh yes, of course. We have your teeth and your claws, too.” She said affectionately. “And I know you’ll use them if we need you to, too. But I’d rather you rested, Ryo Ohki. You’ve done a lot, bringing us here, and Ryoko would be proud of you. Take it easy now. I’m sure Najya and I can take care of any sudden threats.”

“I hope you can.” Sakura murmured. “Can we go now? This place is creeping me out. I keep thinking someone’s going to jump out at us at any second.”

“I know what you mean.” Najya acknowledged, sliding her cape over her shoulders and lifting the hood over her shimmering silvery hair to conceal it from view. “All right then. Washu, you lead. I’ll be right behind you.”

As they reached the exit archway that Hiroshi had noticed, Washu faltered for a moment, realising in an instant why there were no guards posted as sentry within the docking bay itself. She cursed, running her fingers absently across the shining steel posts that shone a criss-cross grid of green lights, blocking their way through.

“Genetic scanners.” She murmured. “I can probably phase through them, but I’m not sure I’ve got enough strength to phase everyone. They’re strong and they sap energy.”

“Can you disable them?” Tenchi asked. Washu spread her hands.

“How much do you want us to draw suspicion on ourselves?” She asked flippantly. “I think hacking into their security system would be considered grounds for deportation. Even if we are here in order to help the throne of Jurai in some way. And besides, I don’t think I have the time to sit down and go through all the potential combinations. I

may be a quick worker, but we do have a pressing matter to investigate."

"We don't know how loyal Yousai really is to that Jurai throne, either." Najya reflected with a sigh. "Politics are never clear-cut. That's one thing I learnt from my time there."

"So what do we do? Stay here all day?" Sakura bit her lip. Washu shook her head.

"There must be a way around it." She murmured. "Let me think for a moment."

"Can you teleport to the other side?" Hiroshi asked hopefully. "Like Ryoko does? You can do that, I've seen you."

"I can teleport, but like Ryoko, I can only do so into known space." Washu said regretfully. "Since I can't see the other side of this fence, and since I don't know what lies beyond, I'm not able to teleport there."

"I guess even super-powers have their limits." Sakura frowned. She reached out a tentative finger, brushing the very edge of the light as she did so. "Will they hurt us? They don't seem so very bad."

"Good question. They're likely to stop us from entering without clearance, and yes, if they don't recognise us, they might hurt us. Certainly they'll summon guards." Washu nodded. "Keep your hand back, Sakura. I don't want you to burn your fingers off."

"But it didn't." Sakura withdrew her hand obediently, holding it up to Washu for inspection. "I touched the beam briefly, before you told me not to. And I didn't feel anything. Just a faint tickle of light… nothing else."

"That's strange." Washu's brows knitted together in confusion. "No lights or alarms went off. It's like it didn't even register you were there."

"Perhaps it didn't." Najya said softly. "You said that your friends were from the planet known as Earth, Washu? I don't pretend to know much about that area of space, but aren't the Earthlings considered — if you'll excuse my phrasing — technologically primitive? They haven't mastered intergalactic space travel yet, unless a lot has happened since the last time we spoke. When I put myself to sleep on Airai, they were still killing one another on that world with swords and sticks and riding around on horses and mules. They had no science."

“True, but…” Washu bit her lip. “Earth are backwards, its true. At least, in a lot of ways. But still…”

“We are *not* backwards!” Sakura objected, putting her hands on her hips. “You said yourself that we were empathic and that you thought we had our own gifts to give the universe! Just because we didn’t spend all of our history building space weaponry doesn’t make us primitive, you know! We just chose not to go in that direction, that’s all. Being different isn’t bad, Washu-san! Everyone seems to think that it is!”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.” Washu held up her hands. “You know I’m very fond of the Earth. But it is viewed in the way Najya described it, by many colonised worlds in space. That may or may not be a bad thing… though more recently, Najya-chan, they’ve come under Jurai’s wing a little more. Thanks to Tenchi’s connections to the throne of that world, they’re not quite as defenceless as they once were.”

“Connections?” Najya stared at Tenchi in surprise, then, “Ah. I’m sorry. I forgot that you were from Jurai.”

“It’s a bit complicated.” Tenchi offered her a wry smile.

“Sakura, I’m loath to sacrifice your hand to my experimental hunches, but how willing are you to take a risk?” Washu eyed the student pensively. “I mean, are you game to… well… touch the grid again?”

“Sure.” Sakura shrugged, flicking her fingers through the beams and wiggling them around. “No problem. See?”

“It really doesn’t pick up her genetic structure.” Washu murmured. “Either this hasn’t been updated since Jurai made allies of the Earth — and being a colony, why would it matter? — or they just don’t think that people from that world are able to wield a threat to Yousai. But it does resolve our problem quite nicely. I can phase Tenchi and Ryo Ohki through, I’m sure of that — and Najya, I’m trusting you can take care of yourself. If you two are able to just pass through it, we might be all right.”

“Would Tenchi not pass through? He is mostly Earthling… and Jurai do run this place.” Hiroshi looked hesitant. Washu shrugged.

“In his condition, I won’t risk it.” She said succinctly. “Enough questions and stalling. You two go ahead, and Najya, go with them. I’ll bring Tenchi and Ryo Ohki and see you on the other side. Expect people… hopefully friendly ones. If Sasami’s entourage are still here,

hopefully if I ask for Lord Tennan they might not think we're about to kill them. With a mad Goddess on the loose, things must be jumpy on Yousai."

"You're sure this is safe?" Hiroshi faltered, and Sakura snorted, grabbing him by the hand firmly.

"Stop being a ninny." She said bluntly, causing hot colour to rise in his cheeks. "Come on! We're going and we're doing it now!"

With that they disappeared into the light, as Najya hazed out of view behind them, and Washu muttered a brief prayer for help before taking Tenchi firmly around the wrist, offering him a playful smile.

"Our turn." She said lightly. "Hang on tight and don't struggle. It will be over in a moment."

Tenchi did not speak, but he nodded his head firmly, and Washu felt the sharp prick of Ryo Ohki's claws digging into her shoulder as the cabbit prepared herself for the transfer. She gathered her thoughts, centering her mind on the matter at hand. Then she closed her eyes, willing her atoms to seperate as she pushed through the sensor barriers.

As they reached the other side, Washu opened her eyes to find her old friend and the two Earthlings awaiting them, and she grinned, releasing her grip on Tenchi's arm as he put a hand to his head.

"I may throw up." He murmured.

"Take a deep breath." Washu advised. "If you must, you must, but it would be a lot more pleasant all round if you didn't."

"Stop right there!"

Before Tenchi could find a suitable response, they were accosted by a man in strange livery, his colours gleaming and bright as he eyed them coolly, a thick, sturdy staff in his hand. At a glance, Washu could tell that it was charged with some kind of magic, and she narrowed her eyes, holding up her hands in a Juraian gesture of peace.

"Who are you and how did you get here?" The guard asked softly. "You are strangers to me, yet you passed through the tunnel grid. How?"

"We're friends. That's why. We've come from Jurai." Washu said evenly. "With the blessing of the Lady Ayeka and the Lord Haru."

"Jurai?" The man looked startled, then he faltered, lowering his staff. "You must speak true… you would not have been able to pass

through the shield if you were not from our sister world."

"So I *could've* walked through on my own. Great." Tenchi muttered, still clutching his head, and Washu sent him a sheepish glance.

"Better safe than sorry." She said with a shrug.

"Are you here about the death of that Lord?" The man seemed apprehensive now. "I wondered… we wondered… Lord Oshima said you might come, when you knew."

"Death?" Sakura's eyes opened wide with alarm. "Someone is dead?"

"You *aren't* here because of that?" Now the guard was confused. "But… you are here on other orders? Something else Lady Ayeka wishes to communicate with Lord Oshima and the Council of Representatives?"

"I think we've come into this introduction backwards." Washu said gravely, her eyes clouding at his words. A brief flash of panic shot through her as she contemplated what he had said, and inwardly she hoped that Seiryo was safe. "We've come here because of the Lady Sasami's illness. We're companions of the Lady Ryoko — I believe she is a guest here also, at this time. We did not know that there had been a tragedy."

The guard looked even more troubled, bowing his head towards them apologetically.

"Perhaps I should not have spoken." He murmured, more than half to himself. "My name is Hiro Kotobashi, and I am the Captain of the Council Guard. I will take you to Lord Oshima — I think he will better be able to explain the circumstances of what happened than I."

"Thank you, Captain Kotobashi." Najya bowed her head in response, her tones gentle. "We would appreciate that."

"Then if you'd follow me." Hiro paused, casting Tenchi a momentary glance. "Sir, forgive me, but are you quite well?"

"I'll live." Tenchi raised his gaze, nodding his head slowly. "It's been a long trip. That's all."

"Then if you will follow me, I'm sure that Lord Oshima will attend to you." Hiro said decidedly. "This way, please."

As they followed the man through the twisting, turning corridors of the council complex, Washu stepped forward, resting a hand gently on the stranger's arm.

“Tell me, Hiro-san.” She said softly. “The man who is dead. Do you know his name?”

“No, my lady. I’m afraid I don’t.” The guard shook his head. “One who accompanies the Lady Sasami, that’s all I know. No details, nothing.”

“I see.” Washu pursed her lips. “Thank you.”

“You’re thinking of Lord Tennan, aren’t you?” Sakura asked softly, and Washu nodded.

“It occured.” She said briefly, and a startled expression crossed Hiro’s face.

“Lord Tennan?” He asked. “Lord *Seiryo* Tennan?”

“Yes.” Washu nodded. “He is well known to me and to my family… I was concerned for his safety. The last time I saw him, he was departing for Yousai, and now you tell us that a man lies dead…”

“Ah. Then I can put your mind at rest on that matter.” Hiro smiled. “I know Lord Tennan, and I can assure you, he is very much alive. It was he who insisted that the death not be spoken of in wider circles — I assumed that it must relate somehow to Jurai, and not Yousai at all.”

“Maybe that Tennan man went nuts again and ran someone through with his sword.” Hiroshi muttered.

“I see.” Relief coursed through Washu’s body, even as Sakura shot her fellow student a pointed glare. “That puts my mind a lot more at ease.”

“It was the young Lord. Fair haired, he was. Handsome too, some of the ladies said.” Hiro rubbed his chin pensively, as they entered a narrow, glass-walled hallway, glittering images decorating each wall. “I wouldn’t know myself. Not my way of thinking, if you’ll pardon me. But he was young, to be sure. No older than your friends here, I’d imagine. The rumour was that he was to be Princess Sasami’s consort… some say he died in her defence, but that’s just rumour, though. I’m afraid that’s all I have… when facts aren’t readily available, people do like to fill the gaps with their own ideas.”

“A fair haired Lord.” Tenchi said softly. “Who might have married Sasami. I can’t think who he means at all, Washu. Can you?”

“Certainly not off the top of my head.” Washu shook her head. “But I dare say we’ll find out soon. I think we’ve reached our destination.”

“If you’d wait just a moment, honoured friends, I’ll tell Lord

Oshima of your arrival." Hiro bowed respectfully towards them as they reached an ornate door, seeming to remember his position and who he was guiding. "It won't take a moment."

"Thank you. That would be kind." Washu offered him a smile.

"May I take your name, please? Under what name do you seek an audience?"

"My name is Washu Hakubi." Washu said quietly. She gestured to Tenchi, offering the young man a teasing grin. "But you may tell Lord Oshima that Prince Tenchi, cousin to Lady Ayeka, wishes to see him and speak to him about the safety and well-being of the Ladies Sasami and Ryoko."

"Yes, Washu-sama." Hiro bowed again, then disappeared through the big doorway, leaving the guests waiting outside.

"Lady Ayeka." Najya's eyes narrowed. "Who is this Ayeka, Washu? I don't remember that name in the royal house of Jurai when we worked together."

"Ayeka is the eldest child of Prince Haru, who I'm sure you do remember and quite clearly." Washu said simply. "And Sasami — or Tsunami, as she also is — is his other child… the young Princess of Jurai. Ayeka is heiress to the throne — the position Kagato so sought and Yosho fled. She was born in exile… and by all accounts, Emperor Shigure was so relieved to actually have someone to succeed Azusa that he blessed her and accepted her into the succession when she was just a small girl of two or three. Since Azusa became King, she's been Crown Princess and heir apparent."

"I really am well out of things, although it pleases me some to know that all Kagato's attempts to remove other claimants met with failure, ultimately." Najya said succinctly. "I should like to meet this Ayeka, when everything here is well. If she has friendships on planets far outside of Jurai, maybe she might hear my case and help Airai, also."

"I'm sure she could be persuaded." Washu said innocently, offering Tenchi a benign smile. Tenchi pulled a face back at her, shaking his head.

"I don't get involved any more than I have to in planetary politics." He said. "If I wanted that, I would have become King of that planet when they asked me to be. It's not my thing."

"Lord Oshima will receive you now." Hiro re-appeared at that moment, ushering them into the Council Chamber, and as they

stepped inside the immaculately furnished room, Washu saw that the man who awaited them was somewhere around middle age, first streaks of grey peppering his thick hair and consternation in his gaze as he eyed his unexpected guests one by one. Hiro bowed again, then withdrew at a flick of the man's hand, and for a moment there was silence. Then the stranger got to his feet, offering them the Juraian gesture of peace.

"You have come from Lady Ayeka." He spoke in troubled, strained tones, and Washu nodded, bowing her head in return.

"Yes." She said quietly. "In a manner of speaking. You're the head of the Yousai council, Lord Oshima?"

"No… not exactly." Daisuke sighed, gesturing for them all to be seated. "I didn't expect further envoys from Jurai, not so soon. But then I should have done. So many things… so much has happened of late that it would be remiss of the Emperor and Princess Ayeka to ignore it. I know things go badly on our sister world, and I know that many feel the illness of Lady Sasami is behind it. Do you seek to return her home? Because we've expected Lord Tennan to take her from us now… especially in light of… of more recent events."

"Captain Kotobashi told us there had been a death." Tenchi said softly. "Please, can you tell us what happened?"

Anguish flickered in Daisuke's weary eyes, and Washu observed the way his fingers had clutched together suddenly in his lap, his tension apparent all over his body.

There was a long silence, then,

"It's difficult to recount exactly." He said reluctantly. "We are all very grieved by the incident, but I won't pretend I entirely understand what happened."

"Then just tell us what you know, please." Tenchi spread his hands. "It might help us. After all, we're here to try and resolve the strange things that have been happening and return Yousai to peace."

"Are you Lord Tenchi, the grandson of the Warrior Prince?" Daisuke asked, and Tenchi nodded slightly, offering him a faint smile. Daisuke returned it, flickering his hands in a gesture of homage.

"I have heard much of your benevolence from the Lady Sasami." He said softly. "It is a pleasure to have you here. I know you have resolved many of Jurai's troubles in the past — so it relieves me to know that Lady Ayeka sends us such help."

“About the man’s death.” Washu said quietly. “What can you tell us?”

Daisuke’s gaze flitted sharply to Washu, and he bit his lip, but nodded.

“By all accounts Lord Motonoya was struck in the chest by a sharp blade.” He said slowly. “I have seen his body myself, and I can confirm he took a wound to the chest, although I am not a doctor and couldn’t say whether it was enough to be fatal.”

“Horrible.” Sakura shivered. “That poor man.”

“Motonoya.” Washu looked thoughtful. “All I know of the name is that they are a high ranking court family on Jurai, but nothing else. I suppose this must have been a son of that family, if he was young as Hiro said.”

“He was barely over twenty, my Lady.” Daisuke agreed sadly. “It was a tragic event for which we are all most grieved.”

“Do you know who killed him?” Hiroshi asked bluntly, and Sakura let out a horrified exclamation, elbowing her friend in the ribs.

“Ikeda!”

“No, Hiroshi is right. That was my next question, too.” Washu admitted. “Lord Oshima, I realise that it’s painful for you to discuss a murder committed under your skies and your auspices. But we need to know as much as we can, however sordid the details. Do you know the identity of the Lord’s murderer?”

Daisuke sighed heavily, and when he met Washu’s gaze, there were tears in the depths of his eyes.

“I wish I did not.” He said softly, twisting his hands together once more. “Such evil exists on this planet, Washu-sama. Such terrible evil that should have been laid to rest years ago. My late Lord Shigeki died because of it, and we thought, with his sacrifice, Yousai would be at peace. But it was a lie — a veneer. Evil still lives here, and still causes pain to those around it. It was this evil that caused the death of Lord Motonoya.”

“Lady Ramia.” Najya’s eyes narrowed to near slits, and Daisuke nodded.

“You are familiar, then, with the demon of Tounochi?” He asked hesitantly. Najya pushed back the hood of her cloak, meeting Daisuke’s gaze with her ruby one for the first time.

“I am familiar with the evil that the Saotome practice, yes.” She said quietly. “I and my whole family have been embroiled in trying to stop them for generations. Ramia is just the latest in a long line of Saotome demons who seek to wreak havoc and pain on the worlds and peoples they infiltrate. It’s because of her family and those that follow their dark teachings that my people are so reviled by so many cultures… even by Jurai. I would dearly like to put a stop to her black magic once and for all, believe me.”

Daisuke stared at her for a moment, blinking.

“You’re not from Jurai.” He murmured. “Your countenance… something… something familiar…”

“I am Arian.” Najya told him simply. “I am a white mage, and my name is Najya Akara.”

“Arian?” A transformation overtook Daisuke’s features, and Najya sighed, holding up her hands.

“A white mage, Lord Oshima, practices magic only for the good of people, not to snare their souls.” She said patiently. “The Akara are not evil witches. We do not hurt people. We heal, we help, we support. That is our mission in life. That and to quell the darkness of the Saotome and bring peace and prosperity back to a divided Airai. That is why I am here — to stop Ramia from poisoning your planet any more than she already has.”

“I can vouch for my friend’s integrity, Lord Oshima.” Washu added. “It’s wise to remember that not all Arians are bad people.”

“Lady Ryoko may have said something very similar, when I first made her acquaintance.” Daisuke said ruefully. “I apologise, Miss Akara. I should not be so hasty to judge. But you have to understand…”

He faltered, biting his lip.

“The one she used to slay Lord Motonoya is very dear to me. Dear enough to be my own child.” He said quietly. “She is the only child of Lord Shigeki and Lady Ramia herself, and I am her appointed guardian — but I have no children of my own, and I have loved and cared for her since she was three years old. Somehow Lady Ramia wove her demon magic through the child’s heart and induced her to kill. I find that hard to either accept or forgive.”

“Misao!” Sakura’s eyes opened wide with shock, and Daisuke nodded.

“Yes.” He said, surprised. “You are familiar with her, then?”

“My colleague resides on the Earth, where Lady Ryoko took Lady Misao after her abduction.” Washu said gravely. “This is serious, though. You say that Misao-chan was the assassin? *She* slew a grown Lord? I find it hard to believe or accept.”

“So do I, but Lord Tennan and Lady Ryoko bear witness to Lord Motonoya’s dying accusations.” Daisuke said miserably. “And though she will speak to noone here, I know Lady Misao has confessed to the crime herself. She is the true Lady of Yousai, my honoured friends — soon she will be officially installed as such. But she refuses to be coaxed into our company, and I know she has slipped out of her own accord sometimes since it happened… I don’t know where she goes, or why. The whole matter distresses me greatly. I am… truly fond of Lady Misao.”

“As any parent would feel, if their daughter were in danger.” Washu said softly. “Which brings me to another matter, Lord Oshima. You might not know the whereabouts of Lady Misao right now… but do you know where we can find Lady Ryoko? We have some concerns over her safety and her… her arrival on Yousai.”

Daisuke coloured, looking embarrassed.

“I’m afraid she was treated rather rudely, when she first arrived.” He admitted. “Our men didn’t know she was a kinswoman of Lady Sasami, and were rather inclined to… to… well, they weren’t sure whether she was friend or foe. But since then she has been provided with quarters at the west end of the annexe, near the Lady Sasami’s room. I imagine she would be there, or somewhere in the complex grounds.”

“Then that’s what we’re doing next. Finding Ryoko.” Tenchi scrambled to her feet. “Come on, Washu. Let’s go.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

The blackness of space was all around her.

Sasami clutched her fists so tightly together that her nails began to dig into her palms, fear and apprehension swirling through her troubled young heart as the goddess soared deeper and deeper into the darkness. Since the confrontation with the strange, silver-haired lady, Tsunami had not spoken to her, and though Sasami had struggled to re-establish some measure of control, it had been to no avail. She could sense Tsunami's anger and hatred prickling around her every way she turned, and yet somehow she knew it wasn't her anger at all, but the anger of another, who sought to govern the goddess's will.

"Ramia." She murmured, closing her eyes briefly as tears began to spill down her cheeks. "I don't know how long I can keep fighting her. Every time she pushes her will through Tsunami's senses, I have to try and push it back, or Tsunami will hurt someone. But I… I don't know if I'm that strong. And now… I tried to take Tsunami into space before, but she didn't want to go. It took every ounce of my strength to force her away from Yousai. Now she's travelling that way of her own accord… what has changed? Why? And who was that woman who came between us?

"*Najya Akara.*" The voice echoed around her as if Tsunami had heard her question, and Sasami glanced up as an image of the goddess hazed briefly in front of her. "*A demon who deserves death, and to whom we will administer it, just as soon as we take care of this business.*"

"A… demon?" Sasami repeated hesitantly. "Tsunami, I don't understand. She protected Ryo Ohki — she defended people who have always been our friends. Why would you let Ramia convince you that she was evil? What is this Najya Akara, and what business are we on, now?"

"Tsunami's will is my will, Princess Sasami. I thought you'd learnt that now." The voice had changed once more, the gutteral intonation of Ramia's Arian tones breaking through Sasami's thoughts. "She does as I tell her. She does not question. I hold her in my hands — but I did not have the strength to slay Najya where she stood. To do that, I need to be free from my tower — to truly wield the full strength of my

magic against that cursed Akara mage."

"So why are we going so far into space?" Sasami demanded. "That makes no sense, Ramia!"

"I have a little matter to take care of." Ramia narrowed her eyes. "Tsunami is strong, and you are annoying. I need to know that my Goddess can kill, if instructed to kill. Hatred surges inside of her — hatred and blackness, that she hides from the world. Negativity and resentment, just like in any other. I seek to harness this… and I want to do a little test."

"Kill?" Sasami's eyes became big with fear, then she shook her head. "No! I won't let you! I won't let you kill anyone!"

"Won't you, Sasami-chan?" Tsunami's voice was soft but menacing, as Sasami felt their progress halt, the Goddess's arms spreading out in an arc around her as the faint image of the Light Hawk Wings encircled her form. "Not even if they're someone you yourself hate?"

"Tsunami, whatever Ramia tells you to do, don't do it!" Sasami begged desperately. "We don't kill people. It's not what Jurai is about! It's not?"

"*My people have executed traitors to their world for generations. Death is a part of life*." Tsunami said quietly. "*You should know this better than anyone, Sasami-chan*."

"But… but *Tsunami* doesn't kill people!" Sasami protested. "She brings life! Not death! Your tree is the Tree of Life, you know that! Why are you letting Ramia hurt you so easily? *Fight* her!"

"You are simple, Sasami-hime." Ramia's tones were mocking. "You cannot reason with a Goddess. You are just a child."

"I told you! I'm Tsunami's soul!" Sasami exclaimed. "I'm her true soul and I won't let you make her hurt innocent people!"

"Right now, it was the guilty I had more in mind." Ramia's tones were ominous, and Tsunami raised a ghostly arm, gesturing in the direction of a glinting black ship, almost hidden by the very darkness that surrounded them. As Sasami glanced at it, she let out an exclamation, and bursts of blueish flame shot from the ship's cannons, as if to warn them to stay away.

"Karasu!" She murmured.

"*An enemy of Jurai*." Tsunami spoke flatly and unemotionally, and Sasami felt a sense of anger and hatred well up inside of her, almost intoxicating her as the Goddess's disgust roamed free.

“Tsunami…” She murmured. “We… you… Haki is… he can’t be killed!”

“*I am Tsunami, Goddess of Jurai.*” Tsunami said unyieldingly. “*I can do whatever I wish. I can kill anyone — even you, if you continue to plague me.*”

“No you can’t!” Sasami exclaimed. “You know that if you did, you’d cease to exist, too! You need me, Tsunami! You know you do!”

“But *I* don’t.” Ramia said mockingly. “I can rip the two of you apart. You are her shell — the one in which she hides herself. You are two beings, and you can be separated. Tsunami, you know what I want you to do. Haki has betrayed me. He has given over my plans to an enemy, and he must be punished. Eliminate him, so that he can cause me no further trouble. He has outlived his usefulness, and the universe will not miss him.”

“Tsunami, no! Please! Don’t do it!” Sasami begged, and Tsunami faltered for a moment, indecision rippling through her.

“You’re a fool, Princess Sasami.” Ramia snapped at her angrily, and Sasami felt a sudden burn of magic sear through her, leaving her gasping. “You are exposed, and you are not as strong as you think you are. When I am free, I will erase you from Tsunami’s soul completely, but for now, you will not interfere any more.”

“You can’t make me not try to stop her.” Sasami objected. “I don’t like Haki, but I don’t believe in killing people!”

“Not even one who might kill loved ones of yours? Your sister? Your family on Jurai?” Ramia whispered. “I know that Haki caused your family great distress. Wouldn’t you like to see a universe in which the pirate didn’t exist at all?”

As Ramia’s words teased and danced at Sasami’s senses, the young princess bit her lip, fighting against their suggestion.

“I hate Haki.” She murmured. “But I don’t kill people, Ramia. It’s not something I do, and it’s not something Tsunami does either.”

“*You’re wrong, Sasami-chan.*” Tsunami said blackly, and Sasami felt the Goddess’s spirit tense up around her, rage and resentment flaring through her. “*He took and humiliated our sister. He tried to harm another of our kin. Your memories flood through me. Ramia is right. He must be terminated, once and for all.*”

“Tsunami, no!” Sasami screamed, but it was to no avail as Tsunami lifted her hand, a bright white flare of magic shooting out across space

towards Karasu. For a moment there was a blinding flash, and then, as the glare faded, Sasami could see that where the black ship had once stood, there was now nothing more than empty space. Horror and fear flooded the young Princess as, in the back of her mind, she was aware of Ramia's laughing.

"You see, Princess. I can manipulate Tsunami's own feelings as well." She said softly. "She will kill for me. That is good to know. Now I've proved that, we can return to Yousai. I have a seal to break open — and a planet to dominate. And like it or not, little Sasami, you're going to be a part of helping me. Just like my daughter, you have blood on your hands too, now. Or are you finally willing to admit that you're not Tsunami?"

Tears rolled down Sasami's cheeks once more and she buried her head in her hands, shaking with the force of the sobs.

"I didn't want you to kill him." She managed. "That wasn't my choice. You did that, Ramia! I'm not a killer!"

"So now you want to pass the blame." Ramia said cruelly. "But do you know what truly turned Tsunami to destroy Haki? The memories she shares with you. All I did was wake inside of her the last encounters with the space pirate. She did the rest, based on your own feelings of hate towards the pirate. It's powerful magic in a child's hands, Sasami-sama. Accept that you can't control it, and step back. Let me take it from you… I might even let you live."

Sasami hesitated for a moment, then she raised her head, her crimson eyes cold.

"Never." She said resolutely. "I told you. I *am* Tsunami. And… and whatever that means, I won't give up. Whatever you make her do, Ramia, I won't let you take her over completely. Because she's me… and so long as I'm still here, arguing with you, Tsunami isn't completely your prisoner. So… so I can fight this. I *will* fight this."

There was silence, and then Sasami heard Ramia's laugh once more.

"Then the battle lines are drawn." She said softly. "You have courage, I'll give you that, and obstinacy that is unbecoming in a Princess. But Tsunami will spill blood in my name… she will destroy whole universes if I command her to. You will be a part of that, if you like it or not. Because, you see, I do own Tsunami. I hold her very soul right here in my isolated little prison cell. And now you have seen what I can make her do. Don't think this will be an easy fight, or that I'll play fair, Sasami-chan. People will suffer so long as you fight me. People you care about, even. Don't say you weren't warned."

"Well?"

As the silence between them seemed to grow oppressive, Rumiya wielded his blade aloft, sending Ryoko a challenging look. "Are you afraid to fight me? I told you, I won't hold back, so you needn't, either. I have to do what I have to do, and I won't leave here till I'm either dead or I've done what I've been ordered to do. If you won't kill me, then it means I'll kill you, sooner or later… you might as well submit to me now and let it be easy and quick."

"*No*!"

A fresh voice interrupted the exchange, preventing Ryoko from retorting, and both pirate and serving boy turned to register the speaker as she ran between them, holding up her hands as if to stop them from fighting.

"Stop this! Rumiya, stop this!" She begged, tears in her aqua eyes, and despite himself Rumiya faltered, lowering the blade he had raised in preparation for a new attack. "Don't hurt Lady Ryoko, please! Stop doing all these things!"

"Misao." Ryoko dropped her shield, coming to put a gentle hand on the girl's arm. "It's all right. Really. I've no intention of fighting him, and even less intention of letting him kill me. I don't think it's what he really wants to do, either… I'm quite safe."

Misao sent Rumiya a reproachful look that pierced straight through his young heart, and the blade dropped from his hands, crashing unnoticed to the ground below.

"Lady Misao." He murmured. "I…"

"Why do you want so much to hurt me, and the people who help me?" Misao asked quietly. "I thought… I thought you were my friend, but you're not, are you? You really are my mother's puppet in all things, and that's why… that's why you keep doing things. Isn't it? You don't care about me at all, and you never did! You're just a monster, like her — a monster who wants to kill people… people like poor Lord Motonoya!"

Rumiya swallowed hard, tears in his own eyes as he shook his head.

"It's not like that!" He protested hoarsely. "Lady Misao, I swear to you, it's not like that at all. But she… she has… she controls… I have no choice. If I don't… if I don't do as she tells me, she might…"

He faltered, unable to go any further under the weight of that

clouded aqua stare, and Ryoko sighed, shaking her head slowly.

"Now you're incoherent." She murmured. "Spit it out already… tell her what's going on, and maybe we can help you. Because you said you were trying to protect Misao, when you had your blade at my throat. And that sits at odds with someone who'd make her kill a man, at least it does with me. You have a lot of explaining to do, Rumiya — and if you don't want the entire wrath of Yousai's Council dropping on your head, you'd do as well to begin now."

"Protect… *me*?" Misao's eyes widened in surprise. "But…"

"Of course I wanted to protect you." Rumiya sank to the floor, burying his head in his hands as the fight seeped out of him. "Lady Misao, you are the only friend I have truly ever had and I would sooner die than hurt you — that's the honest truth! But Lady Ryoko, even the wrath of Yousai's council is preferable to the anger of Lady Ramia. All of this is her will. Killing you is her will, too. I can't fight against it… noone can. I belong to her, and I always have done — ever since I was a very small boy."

"Rumiya." Misao murmured. "I don't understand. If you feel like that… if you are my friend… why would you betray me so badly? Why would you turn me into… into that creature who took a life?"

"I didn't know Misa was going to kill Lord Motonoya. That… that was something she just did, off her own bat." Rumiya said miserably. "I couldn't control her any more than you could. When Haki took you from Yousai, Lady Ramia sent me to put a spell over you — to wake the side of you who you'd always kept hidden. She was Misa — and she was Ramia-sama's daughter in all ways."

"But you came to kill me today, so that doesn't quite wash." Ryoko's eyes narrowed, and she settled herself on the ground, pulling Misao down beside her as she eyed the troubled young man keenly. "You care to explain to me what I've done to cause such hatred? I've only been here a day or two… if that. How can she possibly care about me — or is that part of the deal she made with Haki? Was she going to rid him of me, if he did her bidding?"

"No." Rumiya raised his gaze to the pirate, hopelessness in his heart. "She made no such deal. But she… she knows you have Saotome blood, Ryoko. You could touch Haki's beads, and it worried her that you could. She thinks you might be trouble for her, so she wanted you silenced. She can't hex you the way she hexes others… her spells just wouldn't work on you. It was you Misa was supposed to kill that afternoon, when she went after Yurikage Motonoya. Ramia-

sama discussed Lord Motonoya, and even murmured that she might kill him, if he focused too much on my bird form and made too many connections. But you were the immediate danger. She… she didn't want you interfering in any of her plans."

"Charming." Ryoko muttered. "Kagato's family is full of such lovely people on both sides."

"Misa isn't killing anyone ever again." Misao said emphatically. "Misa is dead and I won't become her again. I won't! No matter what you do to me, Rumiya, I won't kill anyone else for my mother. It feels too awful, to know you've taken someone's life. I… I can't bear it as it is. I won't do it again!"

"I don't know whether Ramia-sama can still call Misa out of you or not. You broke your own transformation when Yurikage Motonoya died." Rumiya said soberly. "Misao-sama, I am sorry. I am truly, truly sorry for everything I have done to you, and I… I know you will never forgive me. But I… I had no choice. I really… had no choice."

"You always have a choice, kid." Ryoko said frankly, and Rumiya shook his head.

"Ramia-sama is a dark mage, and a powerful one. She steals people's souls and holds them hostage." He murmured. "You really don't understand anything about what she can do. Even by talking to you like this — if she comes to know of it, she can kill me just with a thought or a flick of her finger. She already said that if I failed her, my life would be forfeit. It may already be too late."

"How could she know?" Ryoko narrowed her eyes. Rumiya shook his head, trying to quell the fear that welled up inside him at the thought of Ramia's retribution.

"I can't." He whispered. "If I told you… if I…"

"You've told us this much." Ryoko said softly. "If she'll kill you for that, well, you might as well tell us more. At least if we understand, we have a chance of stopping her. I promised Haki I'd break the spell over him somehow, so I need to know about this Ramia person anyway. You can obviously get into the tower, because you know what's in her chamber, and you're in direct contact with the woman, whereas Misao and I are not. Neither of us can break through Lord Azusa's barrier. And now Sasami is involved too, and someone is dead — I want to stop her even more. It's serious, now. More serious than just a pirate's grudge. It could mean a lot of people getting hurt, or even dying. And that doesn't wash too good with me… especially since one of those affected is the man I'm going to marry. I know I

said I didn't kill children, Rumiya, but if you didn't tell me what I needed to know now, to protect and preserve Tenchi's life… believe me, I might make an exception for you."

Rumiya gulped despite himself, swallowing hard, and Misao rested her hand on his arm.

"Rumiya, please tell us." She murmured. "I remember many things about being Misa, but I don't know how my mother controls us, or what kind of spells she weaves. If you know… you must tell us. What is this box of souls? What do you mean?"

Rumiya sighed, dropping his gaze to the ground.

"In her chamber, there is a wooden chest, carved with symbols of Airai." He murmured softly. "Inside the chest are figurines — likenesses of real people bound and quickened by some part of that person. She had me bring to her fibres of hair from the Lady Sasami, in order to bewitch Tsunami-kami-sama to do her bidding. And also from the pirate Haki, so that Ramia can control him even from within Tounochi. She also bears my likeness, in her box. She has done since the day she saved my life, when I was just a small boy. My native magics allow me to penetrate Jurai's barrier, and I was foolish and clumsy, climbing where I should not have climbed. I fell from a ledge onto the hard concrete surrounding her room, and she used her magic to restore me. In return I became her eyes and ears, always knowing that she had given me life but that if I disobeyed her, she would take it away again. She slew her late husband — I have seen the charred remains of his doll after she had wrought her curse over it. She still keeps it, as a reminder, I think, to me. And Misao-sama, she has your likeness also. You are also within her box — that is how she first made you become Misa, even though you haven't seen her face to face for some years."

"Voodoo." Ryoko's eyes narrowed, and Misao stifled a shiver, biting her lip.

"I'm scared." She murmured. "Is it really true, Rumiya? Is that what she's been doing, all this time?"

"But if Ramia can't cast a spell over me because I have this stupid Saotome blood, how can she cast one over Misao?" Ryoko demanded, as Rumiya nodded miserably. "I don't understand. It makes no sense."

"Misao-sama had stifled all trace of Arian magic and identity within her." Rumiya said slowly. "And Ramia-sama didn't bewitch her so much as just awaken that part of her, that's all. When I asked if she could kill Lady Misao in the same way she killed Misao-sama's father,

she didn't answer me clearly. She did tell me that she could order Tsunami to kill Lady Misao at any moment, though… so I suppose in that sense, she can't hex Lady Misao's soul and curse her to death from Tounochi."

"So long as she has a hold on Tsunami, I guess that hardly matters." Ryoko muttered grimly. "All right, Misao, stop shaking. Noone is going to let her kill you, that's a promise. I already told you — we need you to fight, not cower in the shadows."

"That's why I came to find you." Misao said, and Rumiya was surprised by the sudden look of determination that flooded her aqua eyes. "I don't know how to be… be strong or fight against her. But I want to stop her from doing this, and what Rumiya said has just made me even more determined to try. I… I owe it to Lady Sasami, if nothing else."

"Good girl." Ryoko looked approving. "That's what I like to hear."

"What about me?" Rumiya eyed the pirate warily. "What will you do with me, now you know everything?"

"You'd better come with us." Ryoko pursed her lips. "I might have a use for you myself. We need to find a way to get into that tower, after all. The longer Ramia has control over Tsunami, the more I suspect she'll be able to weaken Azusa-sama's barrier… so we need to put a stop to things before she can get free and cause us all a lot more trouble. Rumiya, you can get through the barrier already, and if you stand any chance of surviving into adulthood, you'd better start putting your trust in us rather than in warped witches with power complexes. All right?"

Rumiya hesitated, and Misao held out her hand to him.

"Please, Rumiya?" She begged. "If you are at all my friend, will you come with us and help to stop my mother?"

Rumiya sighed, then he took the proffered hand, squeezing it tightly in his grip.

"I'll try." He said softly. "Because I owe it to you, Misao-sama — and much more."

"Then that's settled." Ryoko nodded her head. "And in good time, too. My ship has landed, and at long last it seems we have some more help. Come on, the both of you. We have a lot to do and a lot to find out if we're going to get to the bottom of this before it's too late."

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

"So, Haki is no more."

Ramia settled herself at her table, carefully and lovingly setting out her figurines in a neat line before her as her golden eyes sparkled with cold amusement. "Misao kindly took care of that curious Juraian Lord for me, so I don't need to worry about his suspicions where Rumiya is concerned. It's not like they can stop me now, after all — my hold over Tsunami grows ever stronger."

She ran a contemplative finger over Tsunami's likeness, watching as it shimmered and glistened with angry red light. "She really is full of hatred, deep down beneath that calm, gentle surface. All the ills of her world that she's sought to keep hidden for the whole of time. But that girl… that child… what of her? Princess Sasami seems a lot stronger than I first imagined. Almost as if she were a mage in her own right — could her words be true? Does she have some sway over Tsunami's very soul? Perhaps."

She pursed her lips, pondering this point for a moment.

"Before Tsunami came to Jurai, the climate was arid, harsh and difficult to live in." She murmured. "Tsunami the Priestess brought them life by bringing the rain and the heavy waves across the plains, allowing them to grow crops and flourish. She bound her soul to the planet's heart, and so became the spirit of Jurai, the guardian and protector of all of them. How many times was I forced to sit through those stories? When I wed Shigeki, when I birthed Misao… all these wretched blessings and offerings to a deity that belonged to another planet from the start. But now, I find these tales useful to me. Jurai was a cold, evil, angry place before Tsunami took it over. Now she and that world are one and the same. Waking Jurai's feral nature inside of Tsunami proved more easy than I thought. Still, though, that girl is a nusiance. I must discover more… I must find out whether Tsunami will perish if I sever their connection, and how best to taint the Princess's own spirit. I thought for sure that knowing about Misao's betrayal and her friend's murder would break her, but she is still fighting against me. Whenever I push through Tsunami's thoughts, I feel her misery and her pain, and yet she never gives up her resolve. How much must I do, before Tsunami is mine alone?"

She got to her feet, pushing Tsunami's figurine aside for a moment as she moved to the window. She knew that the Goddess was still roaming space, fighting a war between her two selves as to whether or not to return to Yousai's surface, and something about this situation both amused and frustrated her.

"Perhaps *I* have made the mistake." She reflected. "Maybe I should have bewitched Sasami's soul alongside Tsunami's. Still, there's no use crying about it now. I will have to try something else."

Her eyes narrowed as she contemplated.

"When she rose up against the man and woman in her chamber, and again in space, Sasami-sama's strong feelings of love and protection towards those she sought to attack stopped her from causing harm." She mused. "But that was before I forced blood onto the Goddess's hands. Sasami suffered a great blow when Haki died, even though she hated him. She weakens each time Tsunami's rage is allowed to come through to the surface. I should capitalise on that. She can't fight against my will constantly — she is, after all, just a child. So I'll make Tsunami take care of those she loves, and see if that doesn't break her spirit completely."

She turned back towards the table, eying the remaining dolls thoughtfully.

"In the meantime, I must decide what to do about Misao." She murmured. "Here's an interesting thought. Rumiya is so determined not to hurt his Lady, but what would he do if *she* turned on *him*? It would be so easy for me to terminate his life, right here and right now — but it might be more fun to make Misao do it. After all, she is my heiress, and I have great plans for her. He is foolish if he thinks I'd slay my own child so casually, just to spite him. Once Tsunami frees me, Rumiya will no longer be useful. If that pirate hasn't finished him, then maybe my daughter will do the honours for me."

She picked up Misao's figurine, cradling it carefully in her hands as she ran her gaze over the delicately formed features.

"You bear too much similarity to your father in looks, but I will govern your heart, musume-chan." She murmured, as light glittered from her fingers. "Listen to me, Misao, and do as I tell you. Misa needs to shed blood for me, and I will be proud, if you do this thing. You will be rewarded, Misao-chan… kill the bird. He does nothing but hurt you, after all — you would be much happier, I'm sure, if you were rid of him."

The magic around her fingers grew stronger, as she pressed their

tips to the doll's forehead, watching as the entire figurine became bathed in light.

"It's time." She murmured. "Do your work, my dear. Make me proud."

"Lady Ryoko?"

As the trio walked slowly back towards the Council complex, Rumiya dragging his feet as he contemplated the reception he might receive there, Misao turned worried aqua eyes on her pirate companion, gripping her tightly by the arm as she did so. Ryoko faltered, meeting her gaze with a confused one of her own.

"What?" She demanded. "What is it, Misao? Why are you clinging onto me like that? I thought you'd decided that you were going to fight… don't tell me that you've changed your mind now."

"No." Misao's tones were soft, and she hesitated for a moment, then she sighed, loosing her grip and dropping her hands to her sides. "I just… nothing. It's not important. I'm sorry. Never mind."

Ryoko's brow furrowed in confusion, and she gave the child a little shake, eying her cautiously.

"No, it's something." She said quietly. "Spit it out, Misao. You don't speak up half enough as it is. Didn't that Oshima guy ever teach you to have and hold your own opinions?"

"Well, yes, but…" Misao bit her lip. "I just… you said you didn't want to hear it, if I was scared. And…"

She faltered, closing her eyes briefly as a pained expression flitted across her features and Rumiya was alert in a moment, hurrying from where he had been lagging behind to the young girl's side.

"Lady Misao, are you all right?" He asked urgently. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I… I can't… my thoughts…" Misao murmured. "They're all…"

She trailed off, putting her hands to her head and Ryoko shook her again, cupping her hand beneath the child's chin as she forcibly raised Misao's face to hers.

"Open your eyes." She said abruptly, and slowly Misao did so, though her companion's voices sounded very far away. She was aware of a gasp, then a curse, and she closed them again as the grip on her shoulders tightened.

“Ramia.” She heard Ryoko say, and then, “Misao, fight it. For Heaven’s sake, *fight* it! Whatever she’s trying to do — we do not need an impromptu appearance by Misa right now on top of everything!”

“*Misa!?*” That was Rumiya, anxiety and confusion in his tones. “But I didn’t… I haven’t made her…”

The words swirled together in Misao’s head and she let out a whimper, sinking to her knees as everything swam. Pictures and thoughts teased at her, taunting at her senses but as she struggled to grasp hold of any of them, they drifted just out of her reach. For a moment she felt shrouded in darkness, as if all light and emotion was dragged far away from her consciousness, and she wondered if somehow this was death, and now she found herself alone. Then, as she struggled against the panic that washed over her, she pulled together the shreds of her awareness, forcing herself to open her eyes once more.

Everything was black and empty, and there was no sign of either Rumiya or the space pirate. A shiver ran through her as she struggled to her feet, a cold chill whipping through her as she tried to work out where she was.

“*Kill the bird.*”

The voice echoed around her consciousness, but there was noone else there, and Misao knew that she was alone. And then, in a flash, she realised what it meant.

“Misa.” She murmured, forcing her fear to the back of her mind as she glanced all around her for some chink of light or break in the dark world that held her. At first glance, there seemed to be nothing, but she gritted her teeth, stepping carefully forwards as she pushed her hands out on either side, feeling carefully for any weakness.

“This isn’t real.” She said softly. “It’s an illusion. Inside my mind. This is where Misa puts me, when she takes hold of my body and makes me do bad things. Mother must have done this — and she… she wants me to do something evil. Oh!”

Suddenly those chilling instructions echoed through her heart again.

“Oh no! She wants… she knows Rumiya has betrayed her, and she… she wants to use me to kill him, too! But I can’t! I won’t let her! Oh, but how do I get *out* of here?”

For a moment her despair overwhelmed her and she sank once more to the ground, tears flickering in her aqua eyes. As she sat there,

she found herself reminded of Rumiya's own words, only a short time before.

"I broke my own transformation, when Lord Motonoya fell." She murmured. "It was his sword… I know it was. Something it could do, that broke the barrier between Misa and I. But even without the sword, it must be possible for me to break through. There must be a weakness, else it wouldn't have happened before. Something… somewhere. There has to be! After all, this is *my* body! Mine, not Misa's! She can't take control of me… I won't let her!"

Resolve flooded through her anew and she scrambled to her feet, taking to her heels as she ran through the darkness, not caring which way she went so long as somehow it led to a way out. The further she ran, the more her determination grew and at length she found her way barred by a tall, blackstone barrier, imposing and dark as it loomed over the place she stood, casting a shadow behind her on the ground. Misao stared at it, then she narrowed her gaze, putting her hands firmly against the barrier.

"If it has a shadow, it means there's light. And if there's light beyond this, there must be a way to Misa and the real world outside of my head!" She muttered, closing her eyes as she pushed against the barrier as hard as she could. "Misa, I know you're there! I know you want to hurt Rumiya, but I won't let you! I *won't let you do it*, do you hear me? I *won't* let you make me kill again!"

With a flare of sudden light, the barrier disappeared as if into dust, and for the first time Misao found herself face to face with the other half of her consciousness. Misa stood before her, her hands on her hips as she glared at the intruder, clearly put out by her sudden appearance.

"You always seek to interfere." She said flatly. "I'm busy right now. Go away."

"I won't!" Misao stood her ground. "This is my body! *You* go away!"

"Don't you understand how long I've been trapped inside of you?" Misa snapped back, anger in her eyes. "And now you want to put me away again? Well, I'm sorry. It won't happen. I'm not going to go away, Misao. I'm here to stay and you'd better just get used to that fact."

"I won't let you kill my friend!" Misao charged forward, grabbing Misa by the wrists and taking her off guard. "This is my body. I am *Misao*! I am *not* Misa! You don't belong here! You're just some evil

spell of my mother's and I don't want you in my head — *why won't you just leave me alone*?"

"You are stupid." Misa's eyes glittered with derision. "Of course I belong here, you silly girl. Where else do I belong? I am part of *you* — the part of which you're ashamed. Your Arian heritage — your spirit, your free will. All those things you've suppressed and which that idiot Oshima-sama has taught you not to show. You and me, we are parts of the same person. *You* divided us, not me. Don't blame me for the consequences, if I act outside of your will."

"*What*?" Misao faltered, staring at her companion in consternation, and Misa nodded her head.

"You and I, we once had a mother *and* a father. But in your mind, you only had a father." She said softly. "Ignoring her involvement in your life meant you ignored what she could do, like she didn't exist at all. Ramia didn't hex our soul, Misao. Do you think she could touch one of her own kind that way? She just awoke me with her magic, and gave me the chance to act freely for the first time. Do you really believe I'll give that up? When she is free, you and I, we'll be Misa always. And then you'll see what it's like to be the one sealed away, unable to even breathe fresh air."

Misao bit her lip, staring at Misa as if seeing her anew.

"I'm sorry." She murmured. "I didn't know that you were there. Ryoko said that… that you were part of me, and that I… I had to learn to, well, reach you, but I didn't… I didn't understand…"

"Obviously." Misa said bitterly. "Even when Ramia brought me to life, you still didn't remember me. It took blood and an Arian sword to make you realise the truth about us, and even now you don't understand that *you* are the one who killed Lord Motonoya. I did the deed, but then again, I *am* you."

Misao flinched, then she shook her head, facing her opponant bravely.

"No." She said softly. "It was my mother's fault. I mean… I mean *our* mother's fault. She's done bad things, and she's fooled people, that's all. Made them hurt others and turn on others and mistrust the people they care about, even their own selves. I'm sorry that I've kept you locked away for so very long, Misa. I really am. I didn't even realise that part of me was being suffocated while I grew up under the care of Yousai's council. But I… I don't want us to be two people. And I don't want to hurt anyone. Truly I don't. If you are a part of me, then you wouldn't want to do that, either. Would you?"

"I…" For the first time Misa seemed uncertain, and Misao placed her hands carefully on her companion's shoulders.

"This is all inside my head, I know that now." She murmured. "But while we fight for who is in control, one of us might hurt Rumiya. And even if you don't care about him, I do. Whatever I've done to you, don't take it out on them. I have a lot of things to deal with — I know that now, and I'm going to try. But please, Misa. Give me back my body. Give me back my mind. I want to help Rumiya, if I can, and Lady Sasami, too. If Lord Motonoya's death is on my hands, then I must repay our debt to Jurai — if we're going to be Lady of Yousai, we have to protect Yousai, somehow. We have to stop Ra… *Okaasama*. We have to!"

Her eyes became beseeching.

"Please, Misa, don't fight me now. Please let me go!"

Misa stared at her, and for a brief moment, her eyes flickered and changed, reflecting Misao's own aqua colouring as they softened.

"Ramia wants him dead." She said softly. "If we don't do it, someone else will. Do you want that?"

"No, of course not." Misao shook her head. "But that doesn't mean we should obey our mother's orders!"

"So you *are* fighting back, at long last." A faint smile touched Misa's lips. "You almost sound like me, sweetie. Perhaps there's hope for you yet, if you can find a backbone and learn how to use it."

"I want to. I *want* to use it, and I want you to… to help me, not fight against me." Misao said stolidly. "Mother is bad and you can't trust her. *We* can't trust her! She's hurting Sasami, Misa! Sasami who has been so kind to us, and to all of Yousai! Maybe you want to be free and have a chance to live, but in Ramia's world, that can't ever be. Don't you see that? She wants to kill and destroy and we might well be in her path, if you continue to help her."

Misa sighed.

"I'm not a fool. I know those things. I am you, remember." She said flatly, then, "All right. I won't kill the bird. Not this time. But even if I don't, Misao, Ramia may. Don't blame me if that's what happens… and if she takes her wrath out on us. She cast the spell herself this time — I felt her touch when she woke me from my sleep. If you don't want it to happen again, you'll have to learn to be more aware. Rumiya said it himself, after all — we are all nothing more than Ramia's puppets, each and every one of us."

With that she flickered and faded out of view and suddenly Misao was dazzled by light and noise around her as a cacophony of voices assailed her ears. Somehow, she realised, she had fallen to the ground, and as she struggled to get up, someone had their arm around her, supporting her and lifting her to her feet.

"Lady Misao?" That was Rumiya's voice, and tentatively Misao opened her eyes, shielding them from the sudden glare of the morning sun. It was Ryoko that held her, she realised, and as she glanced from one to the other, she saw the same anxiety mirrored in Rumiya's blue eyes and Ryoko's amber ones. She swallowed hard, biting her lip.

"Did I… change?" She asked falteringly. Ryoko frowned, shaking her head.

"For a moment I thought… it looked like you were going to." She admitted. "Your eyes went gold, Misao, and your hair… it began to shimmer, as if it was changing, too. But then it was like… something stopped it. You fell, like you fainted. I don't know what happened… but the transformation stopped."

"Are you all right, Misao-sama?" Rumiya asked apprehensively, and Misao offered him a faint smile, nodding her head.

"Yes, I'm fine." She said. "Really. I'm all right."

"And you *are* still Misao?" Ryoko eyed her warily. Misao nodded.

"I'm Misao." She agreed. "I fought back… and I managed to overcome it. But I think Ramia knows what you told us, Rumiya — she wanted me to kill you. That's why I… I fought against her. I wasn't going to hurt my friend."

Rumiya's cheeks reddened, and an awkward look flickered across his face.

"I don't deserve that." He said honestly. "But thank you, Misao-sama. It means a lot to know."

"Ramia's magic is weakening, at least where you're concerned." Ryoko lifted her gaze in the direction of the dark tower, and she nodded, as if making up her mind. "All right, you two. I've had enough babysitting — we're taking a short cut. Both of you, grab one of my hands each. We're going to meet up with Tenchi and the others and then we're going to do something about Tounochi and this demon. I'm sick of the messing around. We're going to take Ramia on and we're going to do it before she can find someone else to do her dirty work for her. You stick with us, Rumiya, and do as you're told. Now Washu and the rest are here, there must be something we can

do."

Rumiya hesitated for a moment, biting his lip as he followed her gaze, and Misao frowned, resting a gentle hand on his arm.

"What is it?" She asked softly. Rumiya started, then he shook his head.

"Nothing." He said, producing a faint smile that did not quite reach his eyes. He reached across to take Ryoko's proffered hand, nodding his head in her direction.

"All right." He said firmly. "I'm ready. Let's go."

"What the…?"

Back inside the uppermost chamber of the dark tower, Ramia let out an exclamation, pulling her fingers back in surprise as sparks began to fly from the figurine in her grasp. A reddish haze enveloped Misao's likeness, and rage flooded through Ramia as she realised her daughter was fighting against her will.

"You think you can defy me?" She whispered. "Think again, you ungrateful child. I gave you life… you will obey me. Kill him and kill him now! I don't care if you are Misa or if you are Misao. Slay the bird, and do it quickly, before I turn my anger on you and have Tsunami tear you limb from limb!"

She pressed her fingers to the figure once more, but the red haze grew stronger, pushing her back as the doll hovered upwards, out of Ramia's grasp. The mage's eyes widened in surprise as the light enveloping the likeness became brighter and brighter, until with a sudden flare, the figure exploded into a bevy of clay shrapnel, shards flying in every direction. One sliced across Ramia's cheek, causing her to gasp and bring her hand to her face. When she withdrew her fingers, she saw the reddish smear of blood and she cursed, anger flooding through her body.

"How dare she!" She exclaimed. "How dare you think that boy's life is more important than me! Well, I will teach you! Because of your defiance, I will take care of him myself! See then how it feels, to know your mother is angry with you, Misao!"

In her pique she had grabbed up Rumiya's figure, glancing at it with loathing before tossing it hard against the wall of her chamber. It shattered into a thousand pieces, and a slow, cold smile touched her lips.

“Now you will cry, my daughter, and it will all be your fault.” She murmured. “I will not forgive your disobedience. You will be my servant again, or more will suffer. Take his death as a warning, Misao-chan.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“We’re not done yet.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

"*Ryoko*!"

As Ryoko re-materialised within the middle of the council complex grounds, there was an exclamation and she spun around, delight flickering in her marigold eyes as she registered the identity of the speaker.

"Tenchi! Oh, at last!" She exclaimed, hurrying across the grass to loop her arms around his neck. "You took your time — I thought a Prince always comes to save his damsel in distress, or have I got the wrong fairy tale?"

"You're all right." Relief flooded Tenchi's face and he hugged her tightly. "Washu kept saying you were, and that Ryo Ohki would know if you were in trouble, but I couldn't sense anything and I didn't know what Haki might do to you. After all…"

"Haki, it turns out, has bitten off quite a lot more than he can chew." Ryoko said with a playful grin. "But I'll explain that later. Right now you look exhausted, and we have plenty of things to tell you. I don't know how much you know about what's gone on here in the last few days, but…"

"Ryoko-sama!" Misao's panicked cry broke through her explanation and the pirate swung round, her brows furrowing in consternation as she registered the scene before her. Rumiya had crumpled to the ground, his complexion pale and almost grey, and only Misao's quick thinking had prevented him from falling headlong. She cursed, flickering out of Tenchi's embrace and re-materialising beside the frightened teenagers as she crouched at Rumiya's side.

"Are you that much of a sissy that you can't take a little teleport?" She demanded. "Misao is all right, so why aren't you?"

Rumiya gazed up at her weakly, but he did not respond. Instead he gagged, retching and vomiting on the grass, and Ryoko sighed, shaking her head slowly.

"Kids." She muttered. "And I thought you were the soft touch, Misao-chan. I guess I was wrong."

"Who is this child, Ryoko?" Washu came across to join them, her

gaze running over Rumiya's strange appearance as she did so. "Is he a friend of Misao's?"

"Not a very good friend, by all accounts… and rather a stupid one." Ryoko said bluntly. "Washu, this is Rumiya. I don't know if you know who Ramia is, but…"

"Misao's mother." Washu said quietly, nodding her head. "Yes. We've been to Jurai, Ryoko. Things are bad there, and becoming worse. We came here because Sasami was here, and her own sickness seems to have been at the root of it. But from what we learnt on Jurai, Ramia was the Lady of Yousai, the bride of the Lord Shigeki, Misao-chan's father. She also happened to be an Arian mage, and she did a lot of damage before she was sealed away inside some tower or other — a tower known as Tounochi."

"Then you know almost as much as we do." Ryoko said succinctly. "Rumiya is Ramia's little dogsbody — or at least, he has been, until now. I don't know what he is, or how he does it, but he has hypnotic powers and he managed to make Misao kill a nobleman — a Juraian who I never met before, but who was apparently one of Sasami's potential suitors. Rumiya is also the bird — the one that Misao and Jiro both saw with Haki."

"I see." Washu's expression darkened. "So why is he with you, Ryoko? Is he a prisoner, or…?"

"He's not a prisoner, Washu-san." Misao shook her head. "At least, not Ryoko-sama's prisoner. He… my mother… she has a spell on him. On his soul. He has to obey her, or she… she will…"

She faltered, as another shudder wracked through Rumiya's body and he groaned, vomiting for the second time and clutching his stomach.

"She will kill him." A fresh voice murmured, and Ryoko glanced up to see a stranger watching her, interest and concern in her ruby eyes. "Your young friend is not sick from the teleportation. This is Ramia's black magic at work… it is she who makes the boy suffer, not you."

"Rumiya… is dying?" Misao's eyes became fearful, and her grip on her young friend's body tightened. "But I… I wouldn't kill him! Misa said… she said Ramia would… but I thought… there must be something I can do to protect him!"

"Perhaps you already did." The stranger sat down at Rumiya's side, running a gentle finger over his brow and as she did so, his soft moans stopped, his eyes fluttering closed. "There. He will sleep, at least for a

while. His pain is eased, for the time being."

"Who are you and what are you talking about?" Ryoko put her hands on her hips. "What did you do to him? If he's hurt…"

"He should already be dead, by rights." The woman raised her gaze to Ryoko's, and despite herself the pirate was somewhat disconcerted by what she saw there. "If Ramia destroyed the idol representing his soul, the boy would have died instantaneously. He is weak, and in pain, but his life force is still holding on. Something has prevented it… but I can't tell you what it was. All I can say is that his spirit must be bound elsewhere, to keep him hanging by a thread."

"Can you do anything to help him, Najya?" Washu asked softly, and the woman shrugged, spreading her hands.

"I can ease his suffering, and make him rest." She said simply. "More than that, I don't know. I will try, Washu, and I do believe he will recover his own strength in time. But his life will only be safe if Ramia is defeated. He has betrayed her, after all — and she will learn quickly that her spell has failed to kill him. Whatever it was that prevented his death this time, she will probably work it out more quickly than we can. His life is still in danger, but for now he has a reprieve."

"Rumiya." Tears pricked in Misao's eyes. "It's my fault. All of it, it's my fault!"

"Will you stop saying that already?" Ryoko demanded. "Self pity isn't going to do anyone any good, Misao. Besides, I don't think that it is all your fault. I think your mother has a lot to answer for, too."

"Then we should talk, and compare notes." Washu said gravely. "And the boy should stay with us, so long as he's in danger. I don't know who can be trusted on this planet, not yet. And I'd rather he was somewhere we could keep an eye on him. If he's Ramia's spy, we need to know what he's about. And if he isn't, he's betrayed her so completely that we should protect him. Likely he knows more than anyone what we're up against, and having encountered Sasami in her current bad mood…"

"You've seen Sasami-chan?" Misao asked, startled. "Lord Tennan was looking for her this morning, when I went… when I went to pay my respects to Lord Motonoya. He's worried about her — they all are."

"And they should be." Tenchi said darkly. "She's not herself, Misao. Let's put it that way."

“I think there’s been a lot of that going around.” Ryoko muttered. She sighed heavily, scooping the unconscious Rumiya up in her arms, then, “Follow me. We’ll go to my chamber, for want of a better place. Rumiya can rest there for now — it seems as safe as anywhere, and you people have just got here. You won’t have accommodation assigned you yet.”

“That sounds like a plan.” Washu nodded. “Lead the way, musume-chan. We’re right behind you.”

“So *this* is the daughter I’ve heard about, is it?” Najya murmured, as they fell into step with their pirate guide, heading into the annexe and up the steps to the small but airy chamber Ryoko had been assigned. “Ryoko… I know you, Washu. There’s a hidden meaning in that name, isn’t there?”

“Indeed, as always. I like to be creative.” Washu said with a wry smile. “It means devil-caller, but I guess you already worked that out. There are many things we need to discuss, when things are calmer, Najya. But yes, Ryoko is my daughter. Ryoko, this is Dr Najya Akara. She’s Arian, like Ramia, but she’s on our side. I worked with her once, many years ago. In fact, on the same project that introduced me to your father.”

“An old friend? One who isn’t dead?” Ryoko raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t realise you had any of those, Washu. Although I think I vaguely remember you mentioning the name, once or twice before.”

“Nor did I, till Najya prevented Tsunami from exploding your spaceship and all of us inside it.” Washu said flippantly.

“If Tsunami was at full strength, I wouldn’t have stood a chance.” Najya pursed her lips. “Her transformation is powered by Ramia’s tainted magic, but it isn’t strong enough to awaken all of Tsunami’s power. Something is holding her back, fortunately for all of us.”

“Sasami.” Tenchi sighed. “Poor Sasami. She doesn’t find it easy, sharing souls with a Goddess.”

Najya shot Ryoko a sidelong look, her odd, almost ethereal appearance offset for a moment by the pensive, cheeky flicker in her ruby eyes.

“Did Washu say she was acquainted with your father when we worked on the Dark Heart of Jurai?” She asked curiously. “Is that right? You must be what — in your early twenties, perhaps? That would make sense, counted in Juraian years.”

“Yes.” Ryoko nodded warily. “I’m twenty four, and I guess that’s

true."

"Washu…" Najya faltered, then, "Forgive the question, but she isn't… I mean, she can't be… Mikamo-sensei's…"

"No, Ryoko is not Mikamo's daughter." Washu said briskly, before Najya could finish her sentence. "And it's not what you think, by any stretch of the imagination. Ryoko was an act of revenge, that's all. A combination of my genes and the genes of another. Your brain must still be cobwebby, Najya-chan. Don't you see it in her eyes?"

"Her…" Najya glanced at Ryoko anew, and Ryoko bristled under the sudden scrutiny.

"Yes, I'm Kagato's daughter, I'm related to this Saotome witch, I'm full of evil magic and I'm probably part demon too, knowing my luck." She snapped. "Are you done gawping at me now? Because I really am getting fed up to the back teeth of this genetic connection. I never asked for gold eyes, or to belong to that stupid family tree. So freak out about it already and let's get back to the matter at hand, shall we?"

"*Kagato*…?" Najya stared. "Washu, you mean you…"

"Stole his genetic material and crafted a baby with it, in order to destroy him using Tsunami's gems." Washu said succinctly. "Which was, in a round-about way, a success."

"I don't sense Saotome magic in you." Najya looked bewildered. "If you were… why don't I?"

"Can't answer that." Ryoko returned with a careless shrug. "Maybe your radar is broken. Or maybe it's just that I never use it, and have no intention of following in my father's footsteps."

"I imagine that Ryoko's Kii side has blocked it, if anything has." Washu reflected. "She is more Kii than anything else, after all — and the gifts of the Hakubi tribe are probably stronger within her than anything from Airai. After all, as she said, she's never been inclined towards Kagato's side anyhow. Her magic has been touched by Jurai's energy since she assimilated with the Dark Heart, so I imagine her Arian side has been pushed right to the back of her being."

"And it can stay there." Ryoko muttered.

"Assimilated with…" Najya faltered, then she shook her head slowly. "So you built a weapon, Washu? A living weapon, and used those gems we worked on to kill him, once and for all?"

"With a little help." Washu's gaze flitted to Tenchi. "Yes. Ryoko

produced a weapon of her own — a man willing to fight to the death for her if need be. So in the end, Kagato didn't know what hit him."

"Hey, does that mean *Ryoko* is a robot too?" Hiroshi demanded at that moment, drawing attention for the first time to the two Earthlings, and Ryoko wheeled on him, glaring at him angrily.

"No, I am *not* a robot, thank you very much!" She exclaimed. "Get a clue, will you? She said *genetic* material. I know science is backwards on the Earth, but even *you* must know what that means. And what are you doing here anyway, either of you? This isn't a class trip, you know. We're not here for the good of our health!"

"Woah, girl." Tenchi put a gentle hand on his fiancee's arm, and she made to shake him off, opening her lips to issue another retort. Then she saw the tiredness in his eyes, and the troubled crease of his brow, and she sighed, shaking her head as belatedly she remembered the stricken child in her grasp.

"You really are affected by this, aren't you?" She murmured. "My poor Tenchi. What has this Ramia done to you?"

"Well, after seeing Ayeka and Sasami, I think I've done pretty well." Tenchi said slowly. "I'm tired and headachey — Washu says I have a fever, on and off. But I can walk and I can think and I don't believe I'm dying. Even if Jurai ceased to exist, there's probably enough Earthling in me to withstand it. But Ayeka and the others…"

He trailed off, then,

"You're fine?"

"Yes. Seem to be." Ryoko nodded. "But I think that's the one bit of good Kagato's naughty blood connection has done for me. Apparently Ramia's spell doesn't work on her own kin. I don't know the particulars, but I think it's protected me from her curse on Tsunami, so far. After all, I'm a *very* broken branch of Jurai's Royal Tree, aren't I?"

"Najya, that's possible?" Washu glanced at her friend for confirmation, and Najya gathered her wits, turning her disbelieving gaze from Ryoko's face to her old friend's as she nodded her head.

"Saotome curses don't work on other Saotomes." She agreed. "They have a very strong family loyalty ethic. Not all Saotomes practice the dark arts — some flee from it and try and live normal lives. Kagato's father was one of those — he and my sister worked together, and they were well acquainted for some years before his death. But even though the behaviour of these anti-magic Saotome descendants angers

the mages, they can't curse them all the same. We Akaras have a similar bond… although the times when an Akara turns against an Akara in Arian history are few and far between."

"Spoken like a true objective witness." Washu looked faintly amused at her friend's phrasing, nodding her head. "So that's why Ramia used that boy to make Misao… well, when she wanted to use Misao?"

"I don't know." Najya admitted, eying Misao for a moment, then shrugging her shoulders. "That's the truth. Ramia was just a child when I last saw her, and her father Masaru was the Saotome mage. He would have killed anyone who so much as laid a finger on his heiress — but Ramia doesn't seem to be so closely bonded to her daughter as he was to his."

"I think she must hate me." Misao murmured. "To make me do such evil things. And I hate her. I really do. She killed my father and she's made me into a monster. I can't forgive her for that."

"Try not to dwell on it." Washu advised. "At least for now, until we know if there's anything we can do about it."

"Misao-chan, you don't look like a Saotome. I wouldn't have recognised you as one either, had I not been told beforehand that you were Ramia's child." Najya observed. "Your eyes are aqua, not gold, and it's said that every Saotome who carries the mage-magic in their blood — however faintly — is born with those amber eyes."

"*Misa* has gold eyes." Misao said flatly.

"When Ramia makes Misao act up, she turns her into a girl with gold hair and eyes. Her Arian side." Ryoko explained, as Najya blinked, befuddled. "She changes her appearance totally. You wouldn't know it was the same girl. I guess it's like me. She suppressed it, so you don't know it's there."

"But not even her eyes give a clue to her heritage." Najya murmured. "Yours do, Ryoko-san. Misao's don't. I find it hard to imagine it's possible for an Arian-driven imp to live inside someone who seems nothing more than an ordinary child to my eyes and senses."

"It is though." Misao sighed. "Misa is inside my head. I know that now. She's a part of me, like you said she was, Ryoko-sama. I just have to work out how to control her, that's all. And that's the difficult bit."

"I don't see Misa when I look at Misao, either." Washu shook her

head. “Or vice versa. My Kii sight was totally foxed by her on all our previous encounters. But then, you fooled me too, Najya, once upon a time. It must be the nature of the magic — if the host’s will is strong enough, it can be concealed.”

“I suppose so.” Najya acknowledged.

“I wish I could suppress it forever.” Misao sighed. “But I don’t think I can. I don’t think Misa will let me.”

“Well, when Ramia is out of the way, it won’t be so difficult for you to work out who you really are, will it?” Tenchi asked her gently. “You’ll be able to decide for yourself, without her interference.”

“If she can be beaten. Yes.” Misao pursed her lips. “Is it very bad on Jurai now, Lord Tenchi? Sasami-chan told me so many stories about Jurai, and how pretty it was. She wanted me to visit with her there, one day. Is it… will it survive?”

“That depends a lot on Tsunami. And Sasami.” Tenchi sighed. “But yes. It is fairly bad. And even though I’m not sure what it’s destruction would mean for me, I’m not anxious to see things get any worse for them. The Emperor is very sick, I know that. And Ayeka might battle through, somehow, but… I don’t know. It’s hard, seeing them that way. And I’m not sure they have the strength left in them to fight against anything at the moment.”

“I’m not willing to chance it, either way.” Ryoko said darkly. “I don’t like that Ramia’s picking on Sasami so much, and I’ll never forgive her for hurting you. As for Ayeka, well, we’ve had our differences, but I’d take her part over a demon any day. What you’ve said has only made me more resolved to get through that barrier somehow, and kick the hell out of this Ramia, one way or another. She makes me angry. This whole thing makes me angry.”

She bit her lip, glancing momentarily at Misao, whose sombre gaze had returned once more to Rumiya’s still form.

“You didn’t see Misao, when she came to herself and realised what she’d done.” She murmured. “When Kagato controlled me, he sought to make me slay you, Tenchi-kun. Ramia’s used the same technique — exploited a genetic connection and made her daughter do something awful. It’s just worse because Misao is only thirteen. Bringing kids into blood-battles is a low technique. It goes against my grain as a pirate… I don’t like it one bit.”

Misao raised her head at this, offering her companion a faint smile.

“Thank you for being kind to me.” She murmured awkwardly. “To

Rumiya and I both. We've done bad things, but you've helped us… and you still are helping. I trust you, Ryoko-san, and I want to help you, too. So I… I've decided something. If… if I can find a way to control Misa's magic, will you let me come with you to Tounochi? Will you let me face my mother head on?"

"Are you really sure about that, kid?" Ryoko asked hesitantly. "I know you said you wanted to help, but still, facing her…"

"I'm Lady of Yousai, aren't I?" Misao's expression became uncharacteristically stubborn, and she nodded her head. "Lord Tennan said I should learn from my mistakes and begin to be a better Lady now. So I want to. Please. If you'll let me."

"I think you're very brave, Misao-sama." Najya cocked her head on one side, eying her gently. "To fight against the Saotome always takes courage, but to be one by blood and yet still want to fight… you are young, but you have spirit. I have seldom seen such good things in a Saotome child for a long, long time."

"Please, I'm *not* a Saotome, Najya-san." Misao shook her head, dark hair cascading over her shoulders. "I'm an Amano. Misao Amano of the Shizukasari. I might have Arian blood and that's fine, if I do. I… I can learn to accept that, somehow. But I'm *not* Arian and I… I don't care about what my mother cares about. I care about Yousai and the people who are kind to me. This is my home and that's what my father would want me to do. I know that."

"Well, it looks like this planet is all right on the hospitality front." Washu pushed open the door of Ryoko's chamber, ushering them inside and Ryoko gently laid her burden down on the bed as Najya crouched at his side, running her fingers over his hands as she sought to deepen his slumber. "This chamber is nice, Ryoko. You must have impressed someone, to be given such a pretty room."

"Well, thanks to Misao, the guards decided not to arrest me as a potential enemy of the state." Ryoko said ruefully, dropping down onto the floor and crossing her legs. "Right. So where are we at? It's all very well saying we want into that damn tower, but Misao and I can't get inside. We both have stupid yellow-eye blood running through us, so we can't get near — seems Azusa's barrier is less easy to fool than you or Najya are. It doesn't just refuse entry, it threw me right back across the ground. Rumiya can — and has — been through it on numerous occasions, but obviously right now he's not an option, which is a nuisance. I had hoped he would be, somewhere along the line. Other than that, Sasami is… is what? Joy-hopping around space, randomly attacking ships? Or specifically targeting certain ones? What

the hell is that about? And why, please, are Sakura and Ikeda here? Not that I mind, but seriously, Washu, do you want to get them killed?"

"No, that's why I brought them." Washu said softly. "We didn't know how bad things were on Jurai before we left, or anything about what was going on here. But I knew that the girl — Misa — called Sakura by name. So I didn't think it was safe to leave them behind. He didn't show me any weakness before we departed, but on reflection, Lord Katsuhito seemed tired, the morning we set off. He would have been no protection, had Haki come hunting for them. Even if Tenchi's magic is out of commission, they're better off where people like you, Najya and I can watch over them."

Misao blushed, looking stricken at the mention of her prior deeds and she turned towards Sakura, bowing her head apologetically.

"I'm sorry for what happened when I was on the Earth, Sakura-san." She said softly. "I was bad to you and I shouldn't have been. I… I didn't know I'd done it, until things started happening here."

"It's all right." Sakura offered her a smile, holding out her hands in a gesture of friendship. "You didn't mean it. Forget it. No harm done."

"Except to her hair." Hiroshi interjected, and Misao's eyes widened, her hand flying to her mouth.

"*I* did that?"

"Actually, I'm starting to think it suits me better this way." Sakura said ruefully, absently fingering the now neatened ends. "So I think you did me a favour. Either way, I'm fine, Misao. Don't look so upset. I don't blame you — noone does. It's really all right."

"So can we kill this Ramia, Najya?" Washu settled herself against the side of Ryoko's bed, folding her arms as she gazed up at her old friend. "Can mages be killed by ordinary methods?"

"I'm not sure I should answer that, being one myself." Najya said pensively. "But I'll trust that you're not thinking of applying the idea to me as an afterthought. Yes, mages can die in conflict. Many have been killed in inter-familial squabbles over the years. You already know I had planned to… well, to eliminate Ramia if I at all could."

"You mean you were serious when you said that? You really came to *kill* her? And you're a good guy?" Hiroshi eyed Najya warily, and Najya shrugged her shoulders.

"The death of one to benefit the many." She said simply. "I don't

take pleasure in the thought, but at the end of the day, I have to consider my family before my own wishes. As it happens, though, it's no longer an option. After all, Ramia has a daughter."

"How does that change anything?" Ryoko looked startled. "What has it to do with Misao?"

"Ramia is the Saotome mage, just as I am the Akara one." Najya explained patiently. "There are many with magic in both clans, but one family is the direct, unbroken bloodline that holds the main thrust of the clan power. The magic is passed from parent to surviving child — there is no other way to receive it, and no way to resist it, either. When Masaru died, Ramia inherited his talents. When my father died, I inherited his. And if I kill Ramia…"

"Misao will get one hell of a black magic overdose." Ryoko looked grim. "I get it. I guess that's not going to be a good thing, is it?"

"No." Najya shook her head. "Misao is just a child, and she's only half Arian as it is… a heritage she knows little or nothing about, as far as I can see. It would destroy her soul, and taint her permanently — I couldn't live with that on my conscience, especially now I've met the girl."

"Then kill me too." Misao said brokenly, tears in her aqua eyes as she listened. "Kill both of us, and then the Saotome magic will die forever, isn't that right?"

"Misao, you can't mean that!" Sakura's eyes became wide with dismay. Misao nodded, dropping down on her knees before Najya as she held out her hands to the other woman.

"My life is already forfeit, because I killed Yurikage-sama." She murmured, as the tears spilled down her cheeks. "And if the best way to help you all is to stop living, then I… I will let you kill me, Najya-sama. If that means you can stop my mother more easily. After all, then Ru… Rumiya won't suffer any more, and nor will S… Sasami or the people on Jurai and I… I… I don't w… w… want to make any more p… people hurt."

"Nobody is killing you, Misao." Najya shook her head, her red eyes softening as she absorbed the child's sober demeanour. "That's not an option either. I'm not capable of killing a child — any child. And especially not one who would so selflessly sacrifice herself for those she cares about."

"But I took another life." Misao said helplessly. "The last time I almost became Misa, I realised that… well, if she is part of me, then I

really did murder Lord Motonoya. It was a part of my will, somewhere inside of me. And… and murder of the Emperor's representative is the worst evil — I… I know the penalty for murder and treason is… is death."

"Najya-san already told you that she isn't going to hurt you, and noone else will think about it, either." Sakura shuffled forward, slipping a gentle hand around the sobbing girl's shoulders and Misao, her calm broken buried her head in Sakura's sweater, shaking with grief as the tension poured out of her. "Stop it. Stop blaming yourself. If anyone else blamed you, do you think that you'd be here with all of us? Wouldn't you be already imprisoned, if anyone wanted to punish you?"

"Poor child." Washu pursed her lips, and Ryoko saw a faint flicker of maternal sympathy in her mother's green eyes. "She must have been holding in an awful lot since all of this began. I suppose Rumiya's collapse was the last straw… she is still so young, after all."

"No younger than Sasami." Ryoko reminded her, and Washu frowned, her green eyes darkening.

"Yes. Sasami. Something else that troubles me." She acknowledged. "We know our young Princess has strength, but enough to continually fight Ramia's spells? I don't know. She's stronger than any of us in so many ways, but with half of Tsunami's power ripped away from her…"

"Kamidake believes that Sasami is stronger than Tsunami." Ryoko said quietly. "And I agree with him. Ramia tried to make Tsunami slay us both, but Sasami held her back. She still has some control, Washu. She's not beaten yet. But we do need to find her. I don't know if any of us can do anything against Tsunami's magic, but maybe now you're here, we can try."

"If you're imagining I can exorcise her in some way, Ryoko, I don't know if it would work on a Goddess." Washu sighed, shaking her head. "Yugi was one matter. She was one demon child and she didn't understand the age or nature of my magic. But Tsunami is older even than I am, and she knows all about Kii magic. I'm not sure I have the power to reach her."

"What about Najya-san?" Tenchi suggested hesitantly. "If Tsunami is susceptible to Arian magic…?"

"I'm willing to try." Najya nodded. "If we can find the girl… I'm willing to give it a shot."

“It might be dangerous.” Washu cautioned. Najya shrugged.

“So what else is new?” She asked playfully. “Being in your company is rarely anything else, Washu-chan. I’ve learnt that from our past adventures.”

“True enough.” Washu’s eyes glittered with humour. “Oh, I have missed you — more than you know. Promise me that when this is over, we won’t lose contact again? No more shutting yourself off to sleep, Najya — I mean it.”

“If we both survive to see the end of this, you have my word.” Najya promised.

“So are we looking for Sasami, or hunting down Ramia?” Ryoko demanded.

“We know where Ramia is.” Tenchi pointed out. “Inside her tower. I want to find Sasami, and make sure that she’s all right.”

Before anyone else could respond, there was a tremendous crash from outside the window, followed by screams and shouts as chaos erupted beneath them. Ryoko was on her feet in an instant, hurrying to the window.

“What the hell was that?” Hiroshi’s eyes opened wide with alarm. “An explosion? Did someone set off a bomb?”

“Not quite.” Ryoko gazed down on the scene below, her expression becoming grimmer with every second. “I don’t think finding Sasami is going to be a problem, guys. In fact, I think it’s going to be something of a no-brainer.”

“Meaning?” Washu scrambled to her feet, coming to her daughter’s side, and Ryoko gestured out of the window, sending her companion a dark frown.

“I think I’ve found her.” She said softly. “And her target is clear.”

Washu followed her daughter’s gaze, and her own expression reflected an identical look of gravity as she nodded her head.

“Tounochi.” She murmured. “All right. I guess it’s time to go see what of our Princess Sasami is really left.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

The courtyard of the Council Complex was already a seething mass of chaos as Washu and her two companions set down on the ground before the annexe, taking in the scene with identically dark expressions on their faces. People fled in all directions, away from the glowing flare of blue-white light that hovered overhead, angry prickles of magic running across the wielder's body as she surveyed the landscape. At first, her attention had indeed focused on the barrier of the dark tower, but at the approach of new foes she turned, and Washu bit her lip as she absorbed the cold emptiness of Tsunami's eyes. She shook her head sadly.

"Sasami-chan." She murmured, and beside her, Ryoko flexed her fingers, her sabre surging into life between them as she tensed, ready for further conflict. "What has become of you?"

"Well, well." Tsunami hovered above them, and a slight, humourless smile touched her face. "Najya Akara. Washu Hakubi. And the Space Pirate Ryoko. Do you think that by some whim you can stop me from carrying out my task?"

"Maybe." Washu responded quietly, spreading her hands. "Although there is something I must ask you, Tsunami, before we go any further into this. You are the Goddess of all Jurai, are you not?"

"You know that I am." Tsunami faltered, confused by the scientist's mode of address. "What of it?"

"Only that I thought you were the Universe's most powerful force." Washu said calmly. "Aren't you?"

"Yes." Tsunami's eyes narrowed, and red light flared from beneath her lids. "Do you want a demonstration — is that what you seek?"

"Great, Washu, make her more mad than she already is!" Ryoko snapped, flaring a forcefield around her body. "Just what we need!"

"I'm not trying to make her mad. I'm asking her a simple question." Washu held up her hands. "Tsunami, we've spoken before, and in great depth about many things. And I understand the force which you wield. And yet one thing still confuses me."

"Do you seek to stall your own demise, Professor?" Tsunami asked

suspiciously, and Washu offered her a benign smile.

“I seek to know why the Universe’s great Goddess has chosen to become the unquestioning slave of another. A mere flesh and blood being who breathes and lives just as we do.” She said matter-of-factly. “You are above such petty squabbles, I’m sure. Why do you pander to the whims of a mad mage, who can’t even get out of her tower of bricks? What do you think is in it for you, at the end of the day? When you’re no longer useful to her, don’t you think she’ll seek to destroy you, like so many others?”

“My decisions are none of your business!”

“Perhaps not, but since you’re talking to some of the few people who have never tried to threaten the force of Tsunami, I wonder why you take her part against us. That’s all.”

For a split-second Tsunami faltered, and the faintest flicker of Sasami’s presence flared through the divine outer shell. Washu’s eyes opened wide, and she reached across, grabbing Najya by the arm.

“Now!” She urged. “Najya-chan, try it now!”

Najya started, then nodded her head, throwing her arms out to her sides as she was bathed in a bright blueish light. As it grew stronger, she thrust a strong flare of the magic across the impromptu battleground, and as it made contact with Tsunami’s magic, there was a tremendous explosion of light. Washu threw her own forcefield around her body, shielding her eyes from the glare as she heard her daughter curse and exclaim not far from where she stood.

“Do you think your pathetic magic can work on me, Najya Akara?”

As the light faded, Tsunami’s form became clear once more, but to Washu’s dismay, the Goddess’s crimson eyes had gone, replaced by the glittering gold of the Saotome line. “You are a fool. All Akaras are fools. You can’t stop me. Even from inside my tower, you are unable to break through my spells.”

“Any more bright ideas?” Ryoko demanded, as Tsunami’s hands glittered with light and the few remaining members of the Yousai public ran for shelter, terrified by the battle unfolding in the midst of their usually peaceful city. “That didn’t seem to work at all!”

“No, you’re wrong.” Najya struggled to her feet, breathing hard from the effort. “It… it worked a… a lot. Ramia is… having to push… a lot more magic into Tsunami to… to control her will.”

“But that doesn’t get us anywhere, if she fritters us while she’s

being invaded." Ryoko darted neatly out of the way of Tsunami's blasts, strengthening her forcefield. "We don't have Tenchi to help, after all. And Misao…"

"Misao is still inside, with Sakura and the others. I hope that was the right choice." Washu bit her lip. "She might want to help, but she was so upset, poor child. And yet, we know that Ramia has taken control of her before. Tenchi's ineffective at the moment, like you say… I hope that Misa isn't going to make an unscheduled appearance."

The being before them chuckled, humour glinting in her amber eyes.

"That would trouble you, would it? If my daughter chose to kill your weak friends while you tried to bring down a Goddess?" She said mockingly. "Misa has already spilt blood on my command once. Do you think that you can prevent her doing so again?"

"You're not going to distract us." Ryoko said firmly. "Ramia, last time you tried that trick, Misao fought against you and she won. She didn't change into Misa, so don't think that you'll take over her mind again so easily. Besides, Ryo Ohki is with them, and if you truly were Tsunami, you'd know already that my ship and I have a psychic connection. You're not really Tsunami — you're just leeching her magic to make yourself feel better, that's all. Sasami's not going to hurt people she cares about. And nor is Tsunami. So give it up… leave Sasami and Jurai alone."

"You think that's true?" Ramia looked thoughtful. "Tsunami is troublesome, it's true. But as you can see, I can take control of her being and operate through her. My magic powers hers — she is far stronger than any of you, and combined with my magic, I don't need to leave my tower to kill all of you. Particularly you, Najya Akara. You have no heir. If I slay you now, I will destroy the Akara line forever. And then the Saotome family will be able to take full control of Airai, just as my father always hoped."

"Don't celebrate too early, Ramia." Najya narrowed her eyes. "I'm not even half beaten yet."

She held out her hand to Washu, who stared at her for a moment, then took the pale fingers in her own, feeling their pulsing energy as she did so.

"I need your help." Najya said by way of explanation. "You care about the girl within Tsunami, don't you? You know her better than I do. My spell has more power when it's charged by genuine emotion —

and I've never met the Princess Sasami. So I need your help, Washu."

"Me, too." Ryoko materialised at Najya's other side, gripping the mage's hand before Washu could react, and Najya offered her a smile.

"Yes." She agreed. "Thank you, Ryoko. I don't know if I can do this — it's one shot, and I'm not sure it will break Ramia's hold. But it's all I have to try… we have to expel Ramia from Tsunami somehow. Even if it's just for the time being."

"Then tell us what to do." Washu tightened her grip on her friend's fingers. "To help Sasami, you know we will."

"Close your eyes and focus your energy on her." Najya instructed. "On Princess Sasami, and why you want to help her. That's all. Let me do the rest. I'll draw on your strength — and hopefully it will be enough."

"What are you doing?" The apparition stared at them in confusion, letting out a derisive snort as she observed their sudden flurry of action. "Do you think holding hands will help you to defeat me? Tsunami and I are too strong for your spells, Akara Mage. You should have stayed on Airai."

"And you should have never tried to use children to further your plans!" Najya shot back, even as a fresh flare of blue energy enveloped her. Washu felt the buzz of magic flicker through her own skin, almost like electricity as it prickled across her body, but she held on tightly to Najya's fingers, closing her eyes and focusing her mind as she sought to ignore the discomfort. At Najya's other side, she knew Ryoko was following her example, and from somewhere in the distance she could hear the fast, carefully formed passages of a spell, as Najya uttered her incantation, the words strange and gutteral to Washu's ears.

There was a sudden surge of energy, and then Washu felt the grasp on her fingers loosen.

She opened her eyes, seeing Najya crouched on the ground, her breath coming in ragged gasps and beads of sweat forming on her brow. Washu dropped at her side immediately, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" She murmured. Najya nodded, speechless from the effort, but she flung a hand out towards where their foe had stood, and Washu followed her line of sight, letting out an exclamation as she registered what she saw.

"*Sasami!*" Ryoko was before her, materialising at the Princess's side as Sasami struggled to sit up, her face white as a ghost and her eyes

shadowed and clouded. She stared up at Ryoko in some confusion, then she reached out hot, dry hands to grip her friend's arms tightly, burying her head in the pirate's shoulder.

"You did it." There was new respect in Ryoko's voice, and Najya smiled weakly, shaking her head.

"No, I had help." She murmured. "And not just from you. That girl is fairly strong, Ryoko. She was pushing all the time from inside… trying to take control of her own body again. But even so, it's not over. So long as Ramia has Tsunami's soul inside one of her idols, she can still try again. For now she's been forced back and she needs to regroup. But it doesn't mean she won't return."

"Sasami-chan, are you all right?" Washu approached the Princess tentatively, and Sasami raised her gaze, eying the scientist in bewilderment.

"Washu." She murmured, then, "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for, kid." Washu told her gently. "Really. You did a lot to help yourself."

"She's still there." Sasami shivered, shaking her head. "I can still feel her, toying with Tsunami. Whatever you did, it weakened her, but she's angry and she w… will be back. I don't know how she's infected Tsunami, but it's taken so much to… to try and c… control her."

"She's still burning up with fever." Ryoko reported grimly. "Sasami, you really have been giving this everything, haven't you?"

"Yes, but it still isn't enough." Sasami murmured faintly. "I c… couldn't save Y… Yurikage-sama."

"You *know* about that?" Ryoko looked startled, and Sasami nodded.

"R… Ramia tried to use it to break me." She whispered. "But if I… if I die, Ryoko, so do a lot of other people. And I… I can't let that happen."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she bit her lip, swallowing hard.

"Tsunami has already spilled blood." She added hesitantly. "She… killed… Haki."

"So Haki really did bite off more than he could chew." Washu reflected, even as Najya struggled to her feet, coming to join them. "Although in some ways, ridding the universe of someone such as him isn't such a bad thing."

"Not if he regenerates." Ryoko bit her lip, glancing down at her

palm where the superficial scar of the black ship's mark was already beginning to fade and dull to brown. "And what of Karasu? I think that Ramia's spell had started to break down Haki's bond with his ship — Karasu was developing a decent pirate personality of his own."

"All… gone. Nothing left." Sasami managed weakly. "Tsunami…"

She faltered, and Washu shook her head.

"Enough, for now." She decided. "Sasami needs to take her chance to rest, before the battle begins again. Meanwhile we have some time, while Ramia does the same thing. And we should use it to find a way into that tower."

"Lady Sasami!" At that moment, Seiryo emerged from an outbuilding, the two Knights in tow, and at the sight of Washu and the others he stopped dead, his gaze going from one to the other with a mixture of relief and confusion. "Washu! You're here too!"

"Yes." Washu said gravely, getting to her feet. "Seiryo, Sasami's had a pretty torrid time. Ramia's in and out of Tsunami like a rabbit in his burrow, and she's used a lot of her strength trying to fight off the spell… she's weak and she's exhausted."

"But she's alive." Kamidake crouched at the Princess's side, and at the sight of him, Sasami managed a faint smile.

"I'm s… sorry I couldn't h… help L… Lord Motonoya." She murmured faintly, but Kamidake shook his head.

"He would forgive you, Lady Sasami." He said gently. "He gave his life to protect you, and he died content. You mustn't trouble your heart about his sacrifice. He made it willingly."

"But I… I didn't a… ask him to." Sasami swallowed hard. "I would n… never ask anyone to d… die for me."

"To die in Tsunami's service is no bad death." Kamidake told her frankly, ignoring the startled look Ryoko gave him at this remark. "Besides, Princess, you're in no state to fret. You need to rest, Washu-sama is right."

"How did you happen to find her? We've searched everywhere." Seiryo looked bemused.

"She found us." Washu said simply. "Seiryo, Sasami's been up in space. Or rather, Tsunami has. We encountered her when we came to Yousai, and Sasami just told us that Ramia made her destroy the Space Pirate Haki and his ship. Now she has a new errand — releasing the seal on Tounochi. Thanks to Najya, that endeavour's been delayed a

little longer — but she will try again."

"Tounochi." Seiryo turned his gaze towards the dark tower, a grim expression on his face. "And Lady Misao? Ryoko-san, have you found the bird?"

"Yes, but he's not in any state to talk at the moment." Ryoko said darkly. "Ramia tried to do away with him when he chose not to obey her will. He's inside, in my chamber. Sleeping. Misao is with him, and so are Tenchi, Sakura and Hiroshi."

"You brought the Earthlings into this fight?" Seiryo stared at Washu in disbelief.

"It wasn't exactly ideal, but I didn't have much choice." Washu admitted. "I promised myself to see them safe, and it was the only way I could. Besides, they've had their moments of usefulness."

"I'll take your word for it." Seiryo looked non-plussed, turning his attention to Najya. "And your friend? I don't believe we're acquainted."

"My name is Najya Akara." Najya said quietly. "And I can see by your attire that you're a nobleman of Jurai… a vassal of Tsunami."

"Seiryo Tennan, Lord of Jurai's Council." Seiryo bowed his head slightly. "And as you surmise, a vassal of the Lady Sasami."

"Najya is an Arian mage, like Ramia." Washu explained. "She came here to help put a stop to Ramia's mad antics, and rescued us from Tsunami's wrath in the meantime."

"Another magician?" Seiryo looked troubled, and Ryoko snorted, shaking her head.

"You have to get over this issue you have with magic, else it's going to blow your brains out one of these days." She said bluntly, flickering magic idly across her palms. "I mean it."

"It already tried, once, if you hadn't forgotten." Seiryo said bitterly. "Very well. I won't try and understand it, but I shall trust your judgement, Washu. If you believe Miss Akara is a friend, then so shall I."

"I guarantee it." Washu nodded. "In fact, it's Najya's magic that's just brought Sasami back to herself. She's a healing mage, Seiryo. Not a dark one."

"Then it's a shame you weren't here when Yurikage-sama was slain." Seiryo sighed heavily. "We had hoped to keep that from Lady

Sasami until she was better,but I guess it's impossible to keep secrets from Tsunami. Miss Akara, thank you for helping the Princess. I apologise if I seemed wary of you — Airai and Jurai don't have the best of political histories together."

"No, they don't, but I'd like to see that change." Najya dimpled, offering him a tired smile. "I'm pleased to meet you, Lord Tennan. And I'm glad I could help Princess Sasami in some way. I have long sought to have Tsunami as an ally for my people, so that they can live in peace the way that yours do. So we seem to have the same objective… bringing about the end of Lady Ramia's dark Saotome magic."

"We should take Sasami-hime to her chamber, Lord Tennan." Kamidake suggested at this moment, and Seiryo nodded his head.

"We should." He agreed. "And she should not be left to herself, not while she is still so delicate."

"Kamidake and I will both stay with her, Lord Tennan, if you wish to convene with Lady Washu and make plans." Azaka suggested. Seiryo hesitated, then he nodded his head.

"That would be wise. Thank you, Azaka. I trust the Princess's safety to you both." He agreed quietly. "And since Lord Oshima seems to have locked himself up in his chambers out of fear, I suppose that means its up to us to prevent Yousai's destruction as much as it is to free Sasami-hime from her curse. Washu-san, I hope you have some ideas."

"Not sure. Not yet." Washu sighed. "Najya is the one who knows the most about Airai's magic. But even so…"

"I have *one* idea." Ryoko said quietly.

"Aside from breaking through the barrier and beating up Ramia?" Washu asked. Ryoko grimaced, nodding her head.

"Yes. A different idea from that, although that's still in my mind." She agreed. "Listen. Sakura and Hiroshi are in danger wherever they are on this planet at the moment. There's nowhere safe when Tsunami might go nuts. But we don't know whether or not Misao might come under Ramia's spell again in the future. Ryo Ohki is with them, so I know she was bluffing this time around. But next time she might not be. I vote that we need to find somewhere for them, out of the line of fire. After all, they might prove distracting, if Ramia got it into her head to use them for bait or target practice."

"Ryoko is right." Najya inclined her head. "The Earthlings are in

danger so long as they remain so close to the centre of action."

"Then I have a potential solution." Seiryo reflected. "The Unko remains in Yousai's dock, and is not powered by Tsunami's magic the way that the Tsunami-fune is. In fact, it's a magic-free zone. Would they not be more secure aboard my ship than here in the middle of Shinoshi?"

"The Unko." Washu's eyes lit up. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Seiryo. That would be much better. They could take Ryo Ohki with them, so Ryoko would know if they got into any trouble. And maybe Tenchi should also go. He's not strong enough to do anything, but he's foolish enough to try, and I'd rather he didn't have the temptation."

"And there's Rumiya, also." Ryoko remembered. "He's still hurt from Ramia's attack. Maybe he'd be safer there, too."

"No, I want to keep Rumiya close, for now." Washu shook her head. "If he rouses, I have questions of my own for him. But I think we should get Tenchi and the Earthlings away from the centre of trouble as soon as possible. It's good thinking, using the Unko. I wouldn't imagine your ship could be easily bewitched, Seiryo."

"Not a chance. I've been down that road." Seiryo said wryly. "Then it's settled. I will escort Lord Tenchi and your stowaways to my ship, and safety. Then I will return, and we can try and decide what our next move is."

"You might be safer with the Unko too, Lord Tennan." Najya reflected. "You don't have a magical aura… can you defend yourself against Tsunami?"

"It doesn't matter if I can or if I can't." Seiryo shrugged his shoulders. "I am Lady Sasami's man, and that means that I can't run away and hide when she needs my help. Besides, one of my companions was slain, and I would like to avenge his death. It was stupid and futile, and I would at least like to be able to tell my Emperor that I did that."

"It would be even more stupid and futile if you died too, you know." Washu pointed out. Seiryo spread his hands.

"So be it, then." He said flatly. "I'm a soldier, and I'm trained to fight to the death if need be. Besides, I might not be a magician, but I'm not a bad tactician and I've not been killed in conflict yet. I don't intend on taking stupid risks if I don't have to take them. But I will come back, after I've taken the others to my ship, Washu. This is Sasami-sama's fight, therefore it's my fight. And that's final."

“All right.” Washu sighed. “Then come with us. They’re in Ryoko’s chamber, and though Tenchi isn’t going to like the idea, I think it’s for the best all round. After all, Ramia is regaining strength the longer we argue about it — and I’d like us to have an action plan before she launches a new assault!”

“The light around that tower is getting dimmer.”

Sakura rested her elbows on the sill of the bedchamber, gazing pensively out across the horizon towards the city dock. “It’s all gone quiet out there, Tenchi, but I’m sure that can’t be good. Can it? Isn’t that magic light what Washu-san said was sealing this evil witch person inside?”

“Yes, I think so.” Tenchi stumbled to his feet, coming to join her. “And you’re right. It isn’t so bright as before. I hope Sasami is all right.”

“There was a huge flare of light, and then that… whatever she was that attacked us on our way here wasn’t there any more. She was just a little girl, on the ground.” Sakura turned to glance at him. “You look a funny colour, Tenchi-kun. Are you sure you should be moving about?”

“Stop fussing about me.” Tenchi instructed her. “Tell me what you mean, about the little girl?”

“She looked like the ghost woman who attacked us, only younger. Much younger. Not like a Goddess at all, but just an ordinary child.” Sakura shrugged. “Two men in strange clothing took her inside. One had red hair, the other grey… I think the redhaired man was the one who was with Lord Tennan at the Masaki Shrine.”

“Then Sasami is safe with Azaka and Kamidake.” Relief flooded Tenchi’s features. “That’s something, at least.”

“Tenchi-sama, Sakura-san, I think Rumiya is waking up.”

Misao’s soft voice from behind them alerted both to the figure on the bed and Sakura crossed the floor carefully, almost tripping over Hiroshi’s outsprawled legs as her classmate struggled to make himself more comfortable on the cold stone floor. In his lap, Ryo Ohki curled up, more than half asleep, and he grimaced up at his friend as she almost fell headlong on top of him.

“You squash the spaceship and we don’t get home. Remember that.” He said pointedly. Sakura pulled a face back at him, but did not

answer, instead kneeling down at the bedside.

“Rumiya?” She murmured. “Are you awake?”

The young boy’s eyes fluttered open, his blue eyes mere smudges in his pale face, but Misao let out an exclamation, grabbing her friend’s limp hand in hers and squeezing it tightly.

“Rumiya!” She cried. “Are you all right now? I was worried… we were all worried.”

“What… happened?” Rumiya’s voice was blurry, and gently Sakura helped him to sit up, as Tenchi retrieved a glass of water from the chamber’s mirror pool, setting it down beside the bed.

“Ramia tried to kill you, but it didn’t work.” Misao said quietly. Rumiya’s eyes opened wide with terror at this, and Sakura frowned, scooping up the glass and holding it out to him.

“Drink this.” She said kindly. “You’re shaking, and you’ve been through a nasty time. You need to relax… it’s all right. Washu-san’s friend helped you, somehow. You’ll be all right now.”

Gingerly Rumiya did as he was bidden, taking in some of the cool, clear liquid with some difficulty, and then pushing her hand away gently as he rubbed his temples, trying to bring his thoughts back into order.

“I don’t understand.” He said at length. “If she tried… I mean, if she really tried… I would have died. She has… my soul is…”

“Najya-san said that she probably shattered your likeness, and that it should have killed you.” Misao said slowly. “She didn’t know why it didn’t, only that something must have protected you. She wasn’t sure what, but she was pretty certain that was what had happened.”

“Shattered it?” Rumiya blanched, clenching his fists. “But… no. If she did… if she had…”

“She said your spirit must be bound somewhere else.” Misao added. “Najya-san is from Airai too, Rumiya, like my mother. But she’s not a bad witch. She came to help us, so it will all be all right now. You mustn’t look so scared. I promise that Mother isn’t going to hurt you again, not if I can do anything about it.”

“Lady Misao…” Rumiya faltered, then his eyes widened with surprise. “Oh! The ribbon! The hair ribbon!”

“Hair ribbon?” Sakura stared, and Hiroshi scrambled into a more comfortable position, sending the boy a strange look.

“Maybe he’s delerious.” He suggested.

“A pink hair ribbon.” Rumiya murmured.

“Yes, definitely hallucinating.” Hiroshi decided. “Is this a side effect, do you think, of whatever that woman did to him? I’m getting a touch confused about what magic does what to whom right now, but I know that my brother always comes out in a rash when he takes antibiotics. Maybe this is the same kind of deal.”

“If you can’t say anything useful, Ikeda, shut your trap.” Sakura said succinctly, as Misao sent the Earthling a bewildered look. “Rumiya, what do you mean? What kind of hair ribbon?”

“I took a ribbon… from Lady Sasami.” Rumiya swallowed hard again, sinking back against the pillows. “Ramia-sama wanted it, to cast the spell. It had her hair on it. But…”

“You *stole* from Sasami-chan?” Misao’s eyes opened wide with dismay, and Rumiya looked stricken, dropping his gaze.

“I’m sorry.” He murmured. “I’ve done many bad things, Misao-sama. I don’t expect you to forgive me.”

“Tell us about this ribbon.” Tenchi sat down on the bed. “We’re friends, Rumiya. Friends of Misao’s — we helped her when she was kidnapped, and stranded on the Earth. Now we want to help both of you, but we need to understand what you mean. None of us really know a lot about this magic of Ramia’s.”

“Lord Motonoya has a sword.” Rumiya began carefully. “An Arian sword. Or at least, he… he had. I don’t know who h… has it now.”

“I thought we were talking about a ribbon.” Hiroshi blinked.

“Shh. Let him speak.” Tenchi shook his head, and Rumiya drew a shaky breath into his lungs.

“Ramia-sama coated my bird wings with a spell against harm, but Yurikage-sama’s sword broke through it and cut me.” He continued. “When L… Lady Sasami saw me, she noticed it. She thought it was done when Lady Misao was abducted by the pirate, and she insisted on helping me. She bound my arm with a pink ribbon, and I didn’t want to take it, because I knew what Ramia-sama would do with it. But she said I must, and I was too scared of Ramia-sama not to. So I did. The ribbon had Sasami-sama’s hair intwined in it. But it… it was also soaked with my blood.”

“Could that explain why Ramia didn’t kill you, then? When she shattered your idol?” Tenchi wondered. Rumiya shrugged his

shoulders.

“She commented when she took it that it was tainted by my blood.” He said helplessly. “But that it didn’t matter, since my soul was already bound to her.”

“Well, whyever it is, I’m glad you’re still alive.” Misao said softly. “Lord Motonoya’s sword is very powerful, though. It broke my transformation into Misa, and made me remember.”

“Ramia-sama said his blade was probably of Arian metal and it could likely break through a weak Arian hex.” Rumiya remembered. “She was dismissive about it, because she said she could kill me far more easily than he could, and I didn’t think much more about it.”

“But you did warn me away from it, when I was Misa.” Misao sighed. “Maybe it’s stronger than she thinks. It did make me Misao again… and I haven’t been Misa since.”

“So, you’re awake, Rumiya.” At that moment the bedroom door opened to reveal Washu, Najya, Seiryo and Ryoko in tow. At the sight of the nobleman, Misao let out an exclamation, getting to her feet.

“Lord Tennan, do you know who has Yurikage-sama’s sword?” She asked eagerly. “Rumiya says it can break through Arian magic… maybe we can use it to stop my mother somehow?”

“I have the sword, in my quarters.” Seiryo said, startled. “Yurikage said something similar. Rumiya, how much do you know about the sword? How effective is it?”

“I don’t know really.” Rumiya eyed the tall, well-built nobleman warily, and Sakura could see the apprehension on his face. “I’m sorry, my Lord, that’s the truth. Ramia-sama didn’t seem to think that it could do much damage to her. She said it could break through weak spells. That’s all.”

“Either way, it’s worth knowing about.” Washu pursed her lips. “Ryoko, you didn’t mention that sword before.”

“We’ve not exactly had time, and I didn’t know it was that important. After all, it didn’t do Lord Motonoya a lot of good.” Ryoko snapped back, oblivious to Misao’s sudden flinch at the mention of her past misdeeds.

“Ryoko, watch what you say.” Sakura scolded. “Misao is here, you know.”

Ryoko turned, biting her lip as she took in the young girl’s expression, and she shook her head.

“Sorry.” She said. “I didn’t mean to be so blunt about it.”

“Najya-san, what do you know about swords from Airai?” Tenchi asked curiously. Najya looked pensive.

“I’ve heard a lot, but it could be rumour.” She admitted. “It’s said the blades are forged from metal mined from the hills near the heart of Saotome country. There are some minerals on Airai which resist the strong magical impulses of the native people, else the planet wouldn’t be able to survive. Their force is counteractive — an opposing magical energy, if you like. One that the mage-born people of Airai have never been able to fully harness. There has to be some balance, after all. But I’ve never actually seen such a sword. And I wouldn’t know if it could hurt Ramia or not.”

She eyed Misao for a moment, then,

“Misao-chan? When we came in, did I hear you say it made you change back to yourself?”

“Yes.” Misao nodded her head. “Why?”

“Then if you truly want to use your magic to help us, you should steer well clear of it.” Najya frowned. “I’m not sure it would discriminate against good or bad intentions, a blade like that. As far as I understand it, the metal dampens all elemental Arian magic. Yours. Mine. Ramia’s.”

“So why would anyone on Airai want to make swords like that, then?” Seiryo looked confused. “If they can hurt the native people.”

“Precisely for that reason.” Najya shook her head. “Airai isn’t like Jurai, Lord Tennan. Our planet is divided into many, many different clans. The Akara and the Saotome are the strongest and most dominant, but there are other, non-magical cultures, too, and those who practice lesser arts. Many of these seek protection from Saotome curses and some even fear us because of the strength we wield. After all, some of the things we can do are strange even by Arian standards. It’s this reason that Airai’s ancient empire originally broke up. The peoples were too divided, and fought against one another, devising weapons to stall each other’s progress instead of working together. And of course, outside forces have taken advantage over the generations of our weakness and paranoia. They’ve been able to purchase weaponry made of Arian steel, if there’s enough coin to pay the fee.”

“I guess the Motonoya family did just that.” Seiryo reflected. “It’s sure that they don’t lack for wealth.”

“Well, the sword should be returned to the family, when you go back to Jurai.” Najya said firmly. “It would do no good in Arian hands.”

“But in the meantime, can we use it against Ramia?” Tenchi asked hesitantly.

“How good are you with a sword?” Najya eyed him thoughtfully, and Ryoko snorted.

“Tenchi slew Kagato. Twice. What more do you need to know?” She said frankly.

“Then I suggest you make a detour on your trip to the Unko, Lord Tennan.” Najya turned to Seiryo, who nodded his head.

“The Unko?” Hiroshi frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We think it would be safer for you and Sakura — and Tenchi, in his current state — to stay on Seiryo’s ship while things are so dangerous here. Ryo Ohki will go with you, so that if you need to communicate with us, Ryoko will get the message right away.” Washu said succinctly. “None of us want you killed, so it seems like a good plan.”

“I’m not going to hide like a coward!” Tenchi objected.

“Yes, you are.” Ryoko said firmly, resting her hands on his shoulders and kissing him, taking him off guard. “Else I’ll be mad with you. And even madder if you wind up killed. I let you have your way against Haki, and he almost killed you. We all know that at normal strength you could probably wipe out this Ramia. But you’re not at anywhere near that and I will not lose you, Tenchi-kun. So don’t argue with me, and do as you’re told. Go with Seiryo, keep an eye on the terrible twosome here, and take care of Yurikage’s sword. You might find you need to use it.”

“She’s right, Tenchi.” Sakura bit her lip. “None of us are much use in a fight right now. We should do as they say… it’s the best way we can help.”

Tenchi faltered, then he sighed, the rebellion washing out of him as he met his fiancee’s gaze.

“All right.” He murmured. “But if you need me…”

“I promise.” Ryoko assured him. “Look after Sakura and Hiroshi, and hopefully we’ll see you all very soon.”

She kissed him again, then released her grip on his shoulders.

“Then if you’d come with me. Lord Tenchi, Sakura-san, Hiroshi-san.” Seiryo bowed in their direction, indicating the door as Ryo Ohki gave a half asleep mew, bounding up onto Tenchi’s shoulder and settling herself down against his neck. “It’s this way.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

The moon glimmered high in the sky, glittering over the Council Complex of Yousai as Sasami pulled her cape more tightly around her body, shivering from the bitter wind that whipped around her. Despite her fear and her apprehension, she knew she could not turn back… there was no turning back. Behind her, the path that seconds earlier had seemed so clear and easy to navigate became thick with sharp, angry thorns and briars, and she swallowed her nerves, pushing ahead once more.

After all, there was nowhere else to go.

"I told you that it wouldn't be an easy ride, Princess Sasami."

There was a flash of eerie light and the form of the Arian mage flickered into view before her, becoming more and more substantial with every passing moment. Cruel humour gleamed in her hard amber eyes, and she offered Sasami a slight smile as she observed the Princess's hesitant progress.

"I will give you credit for perseverance, if nothing else." The mage acknowledged, bowing her head mockingly before her foe. "But I have far more reserves of strength than a little girl born of Jurai. My whole life has been crafted and shaped for this purpose — to dominate and claim in the name of the Saotome family. I will take Yousai, because they sought to confine me. That was always my plan — my intention for coming and marrying that weak Lord in the first place. And now I will take Jurai too, once Tsunami is no longer troublesome to me. Without a Royal Family, and without their magic, Jurai will wither and die. My people will take it, heart and soul, and recreate the foundations of Airai's once great Empire. These plans have been in motion through every generation of my family. My father negotiated with Prince Kagato. Do you think you can stand between me and the destiny of the Saotome?"

"You're not going to hurt my family any more!" Sasami summoned her courage, stopping in her tracks and glaring at her opponant. "I won't let you, Ramia! Tsunami is older than that — older than Airai and the stupid empire you might have had once. She's older than anything your twisted, horrible family might want to do, and she's not going to be your weapon!"

"Isn't she?"

Ramia raised her hand to the sky, as a bolt of blue lightning illuminated

their surroundings, and for the first time Sasami became aware of the ghostly apparition of a ship hovering high above their heads. She let out a cry of dismay as she recognised the distinctive black body of Karasu, glinting and gleaming in such a way that she knew it could only be a spectre. Ramia eyed her discomfort with an amused chuckle, nodding her head as she did so.

"Tsunami has already killed in my name." She said softly. "Do you really think you can prevent her from doing so again?"

From somewhere behind the mage's form, Sasami was aware of the sudden glow of white, and she took a hesitant step back as Tsunami rose before them, shackles at her wrists and ankles and a look of anguish in her eyes as the tarnished wings of the Light Hawk spread out around her.

"Will you fail me, Sasami?" She whispered. 'Will you let me spill more blood in her name?'
"No!"

Sasami sat bolt upright in bed, breathing hard as the sweat coursed across her brow. She gripped hold of her bedcovers tightly, panic washing through her in waves as she struggled to get a hold of her composure. Her head throbbed and span, and although she knew it had been a dream, she could also feel Ramia's dark forces surging within Tsunami's spirit once more, teasing and taunting at her as they sought to awaken the Goddess's more malevolent side.

"Princess Sasami?"

The door of the chamber swung open, and Sasami started, sighing with relief as she made out Kamidake's silhouette in the gloom. She shivered again, and in a moment he was by her side, concern clear on his features as he sat down beside her bed.

"Princess Sasami, is there something I can do to help?" He asked gently, placing his hand carefully against her brow and then withdrawing it again. "You're still so feverish — you need to rest."

"I can't rest." Sasami choked, tears welling in her crimson eyes as she shook her head decidedly. "Ramia was in my dream, teasing me and I know she's going to come back. I have to stop Tsunami, Kamidake. I have to stop her from doing what Ramia says. If I… If I let my guard down, she'll take control of my body again and she'll make Tsunami do more bad things. I can't let that happen!"

"Princess, you're already exhausted." Kamidake protested. "Are you sure that you can manage? There's nothing anyone else can do?"

"Tsunami is my problem. Noone else can help." Sasami said

soberly. “I’m sorry, Kamidake. I wish I *could* ask you for help. But I don’t know if even I can stop her and I don’t want her to hurt you or anyone else I care about. I’m so scared — more scared than I’ve ever been, but I can’t give up. I won’t give up! Even when Ramia is in my head, or turning Tsunami’s heart, I can still prevent her from using Tsunami’s magic to destroy planets or galaxies and so long as that’s still true I have to keep fighting. But I’m so frightened of what might happen, if I fail. What’s going to happen to Ayeka and Uncle and all the people I love, if Ramia wins?”

“We have faith in you, Sasami-sama.” Kamidake said quietly, and Sasami flung her arms around the startled knight, burying her head in his shoulder as her tears flowed down her cheeks.

“I wish I knew how to make her go away forever.” She whispered. “I wish that there was a way, so that I’d never have to do this again.”

“Who, Hime? Ramia or Tsunami?”

“Both.” Sasami admitted. “But… but Tsunami is my responsibility. She’s hurt too, and she needs me to help her. You and Ayeka and Tenchi and Ryoko… everyone has always done so much to help me. To save me, in the past. But I… I’m Tsunami, really. And I must be able to do something to protect myself. It just… it s… seems so hard, and I’m so tired… I know I’m getting weaker and I’m frightened of what happens if I lose.”

“You won’t lose.” Kamidake told her gently. “And you’re not alone. You may be the only one who can deal with Tsunami, but there are friends here who will help where Ramia is concerned. Try and keep strong, Hime. As I said, we all believe.”

He got slowly to his feet, and Sasami gazed up at him, tears still staining her cheeks as she slowly nodded her head.

“I will.” She murmured. “Thank you, Kamidake. I feel… a little stronger now, just from talking to you.”

“Good.” Kamidake’s sombre features broke into a smile. “Then try and rest. And remember that noone is as strong as Tsunami. By beginning to use her magic, you’ve accepted now that you are her — the true core of her being, in so many ways. Nobody is as strong as *you* are, Princess Sasami. You just need to try and find that strength and hold on to it.”

“I’ll do my best.” Sasami promised. She grabbed his hand momentarily, squeezing it tightly, and then releasing it. “Good night, Kamidake.”

“Goodnight, Hime-sama.” Kamidake replied softly. Then he was gone from the room, the door sliding shut behind him, and Sasami flopped back on her pillows, uttering a heavy sigh.

“Keep fighting.” She murmured. “I must… oh, I must. But it’s so difficult, and she’s so horrible, making me do and see such awful things! Still, that’s what she wants — to break my spirit, and I won’t let her do it! Tsunami is guardian of Jurai — somehow I must shake off Ramia’s stupid spell and find a way to protect all the people I love, instead of hurting and worrying them in this way!”

“There must be something I can do.”

In the shadows beyond the Princess’s chamber, Misao slipped away from her friend’s room, a troubled expression on her young face as she contemplated all she had overheard. “Sasami is suffering so much, and it’s all because of me and the things my mother has done. I must put it right… but how?”

She hesitated outside of her room for a moment, raising her hand to push open the door, but then she shook her head, turning away and heading down the steep stairway to the level below. Pushing open the door of the complex library, she flicked on the light, moving between the shelves of books as she hunted for the ones she wanted. At length she reached the correct shelf, and her fingers touched an old, faded volume, coated in dust as if it had not been removed from its resting place for some time. A faint smile touched Misao’s lips as she set it down on one of the nearby tables, flicking it open as she scanned her gaze over the opening pages.

“*To my Misao, for when she needs it most.*”

The words were written in sloping script, faded by time, but still clearly legible, and for a moment, Misao pressed her fingers to the page, as if by touching the words she could connect with her dead father’s soul.

“Father knew that one day I’d be Lady of Yousai.” She murmured. “But he can’t have known it would happen so soon. And yet, even despite that…”

She sighed, turning over the next pages and glancing briefly at the careful illustrations that depicted Tsunami and the planet of Yousai, glittering with all its jewel-based glory. It was an old, stylised image, one that Misao had seen many times before during her studies, but she paused for a moment anyway, tracing a line between the Goddess’s

holy shrines and the significant landmarks that had grown and swollen into the Shinoshi that dominated the landscape today.

"Misao-sama?"

The voice made her start and she jerked around, shutting the book with a snap as she stared at the intruder. A cloud of dust came up from the volume as she did so, and she coughed, waving her hand in front of her face in an attempt to disperse it.

"Rumiya!" She hissed. "What are you doing here, this late at night?"

"I followed you." Rumiya flexed his hands, morphing into his bird form as he fluttered his wings to blow the dust away from her face. "There. What are you doing here, Lady Misao? Ryoko-sama and the others will wonder if you're under Lady Ramia's spell again at this rate!"

"Why are you following me?" Misao asked indignantly. "I don't have to have your permission to come to the library to read, do I?"

"Of course not." Rumiya perched himself on the back of the chair across the other side of the table, tilting his head as he eyed her apologetically. "I just… wanted to make sure you were safe. That's all."

"None of us are safe." Misao sighed heavily, resting her chin in her hands. "I couldn't sleep, Rumiya, so I went to see Lady Sasami. But I couldn't. I wanted to tell her… to talk to her about Lord Motonoya. But she's so weak and so unhappy. I want to do something for her, but I'm not sure what. I thought maybe I could ask my father for help."

"Lady Misao, your father is dead." Rumiya murmured gently. Misao nodded impatiently.

"I know that." She said flatly, resting her palm on the book and pushing it across the table. "I didn't mean actually talking to him. I meant… this."

"What is it?" Rumiya glimmered and changed back into his human form, sitting down as he took the book carefully in his hands. "It looks like a history book to me."

"It is. Sort of." Misao nodded her head. "My father gave it to me. Or at least, he dedicated it to me when I was born. It's been here ever since. He told Lord Oshima that when I needed to know about being Lady of Yousai, I should be given it to read. They were going to give it to me formally at my inauguration, but I knew it was here, and I… I

need it now. After all, at this rate, there'll be no Yousai for me to be Lady of. And I need help, Rumiya. It's the only way I can ask my father's advice."

"I see." Rumiya said gravely. "So what does it tell you?"

"I don't know." Misao sighed. "Everything about governing a world at peace under the Imperial rule, but I don't think we're that any more. I'm a little scared, and I don't know where to turn. All I know is that it's my responsibility to fix this, somehow. And I mean to… I just haven't got it figured out yet."

"Then I'll help you." Rumiya offered. Misao glanced at him hesitantly, then she shook her head.

"I can't." She said softly. "You're still weak, Ru-kun. White as a ghost. I don't want her to be able to hurt you again."

"What did you call me?" Rumiya stared, and Misao pinkened.

"Sorry." She murmured. "I guess… I guess little bits of Misa are still inside of my head — that's what she called you, isn't it?"

"Yes." Rumiya hesitated, then, "But I don't mind it, when you say it, Misao-sama. I like you more than Misa."

Misao's blush deepened at this, and for a moment there was an awkward silence between them. Then Rumiya's glance strayed once more to the book and he let out an exclamation, flicking over several pages until he reached the back of the book.

"What is it?" Misao was alert in a moment, glad of the distraction, and Rumiya frowned, sliding his finger beneath the cover of the book and it's dustwrapper. For a moment he seemed to fish around, then, at length, he pulled out a folded sheet of paper, setting it down on the table between them. Misao's eyes widened, and Rumiya shrugged his shoulders.

"I saw the edge of it, sticking out." He said. "When you gave me the book, I guess it slipped loose."

Misao bit her lip, scooping it up and carefully unfolding it, smoothing out the single sheet on the table top as she skimmed over its contents. It was, she soon realised a letter, written on traditional Yousai paper and for a moment she stared blankly at the characters, unable to make them out. Then, as she gathered her thoughts, a faint smile touched her lips, and she ran her finger down the side of the sheet, mouthing the words to herself.

"Well?" Rumiya asked curiously. "What does it say, Misao-sama? It

looks like a bunch of squiggles to me."

"It's written in the old language of the Shizukasari. A language Lord Oshima instructed me on personally, even though it's scarcely used." Misao murmured. "I never understood why, but maybe it was part of his promise to my father. He wanted me to know what it meant to be Shizukasari, even if I was part Arian. He couldn't have known, I suppose, whether he would succeed in trapping my mother. I think he felt his life was in danger, Rumiya. Maybe he already knew she had a spell cast on him, and yet he did it anyway. And left me this letter, in case I ever needed it. In case he failed."

"Will you tell me what the letter says?" Rumiya asked gently. Misao nodded, smoothing the sheet once more as she traced the words reverently.

"*My most precious gift to Yousai*." She murmured softly. "*Your true identity lies in your name, Misao of the Shizukasari. If I am not here to guide you, know I will still be your strength, whenever you need to fight for the people I leave behind. Have belief in your own heart, as I believe in you, and lead our people to peace.*"

"Your father wrote that?" Rumiya stared. Misao nodded her head.

"It's in the same hand as the dedication." She whispered, tears pricking at her eyes. "And he's right. I… I'd forgotten… but he's right. How did he know — how could he know that I'd be so confused, so many years along the line? I barely had a chance to know my father, and yet it's almost as if he knew me. As if he knew I'd have doubts and hesitations. Maybe even that my mother would try and use me in her schemes."

"Perhaps he did." Rumiya reasoned. "He did know what Ramia-sama was capable of, after all."

He frowned, eying the sheet of paper.

"So what does he mean, your identity lies in your name?" He asked. "Misao of the Shizukasari? What is he saying? I don't understand."

"My name." Misao whispered, dashing the tears from her cheeks as she got to her feet, closing the book carefully and reverently as she hugged it to her. "The gift wasn't the book, but the *letter* in the book. That's what he wanted me to see, when I needed to see it. To remind me that, even if he isn't there to raise me himself, he's still a part of me and I'm not alone."

"But…?"

“Misao means Fidelity.” Misao turned to him, offering him a bittersweet smile. “That’s what he was telling me. Faithful of the Shizukasari. Loyalty to Yousai. That’s what he wanted me to know. That this is *my* world and not Ramia’s… and these are *my* people, not hers. So I need to do something about it, before any more of them are hurt. And I keep saying it, but I’m scared and I don’t follow through. This time I’m not going to be scared, Rumiya. This time I’m sure. I’m Misao, Lady of the Shizukasari. And I’m going to do what I have to do to *stop* my mother’s evil plans!”

“I don’t understand.” Rumiya faltered, but Misao set the book aside, resting her hands on his shoulders and meeting his blue eyes with determined aqua ones.

“I need a favour from you.” She said quietly.

“From me?” Rumiya was taken aback.

“Yes.” Misao hesitated, her eyes narrowing as she contemplated the choice she had made. Then she set her teeth, nodding her head decidedly. “Yes. I do. I really do. And you can’t argue with me, Rumiya, because I… I am your mistress. I am Lady of Yousai and… and it’s not a request, but it’s an order. All right?”

“An order…?” Rumiya looked confused, and Misao swallowed hard, gathering her composure.

“All right.” She whispered. “Rumiya, make me Misa.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

Enough was enough.

Sasami slipped silently out of bed, moving to the window of her chamber as she contemplated the decision she had made. After several hours tossing and turning, she had come to a firm conclusion — that the only way she was going to fight off Ramia's invasive magic was to deal with the situation head on — face the threat and fight it as best she could.

"I can't ask anyone else to do it for me." She murmured, shivering and pulling her cape tightly around her shoulders as she did so. "I've already caused enough pain to enough people since I lost full control of Tsunami."

She shut her eyes against the tears, hesitating for a moment as she summoned what little strength she had. Leaving through the door would be difficult, she knew, because Kamidake still kept watch outside. However, as she had thought things over, she had remembered how Misa had managed to get up onto her balcony and upon careful examination, she found the vines and stone ledges that her rival had used to scale the annexe walls. Not without misgivings, she clambered carefully onto the top of the railing, lowering herself gingerly as she concentrated her attention fully on the task ahead.

"I mustn't look down. Tsunami isn't afraid of anything." She murmured, more to convince herself than because she actually believed it. "And if I was more Tsunami, Ramia wouldn't be able to have so much access. So I have to do what I have to do. Even if my head is spinning and my hands are shaking, I have to find a way to confront Ramia and deal with her somehow once and for all."

"*So, you'd come to kill me, would you, Princess Tsunami?*" The voice was mocking and cold, startling her and she almost loosed her grip on the slippery, dew-covered vines as she did so. She clung to them more tightly, swallowing her panic as she struggled to bring her tattered composure back together.

"Maybe." She muttered. "Are you afraid of me, then? If I came, would you be scared?"

"*Of a pitiful, feverish child? Please*." Ramia's derisive laughter echoed

in her ears and Sasami's resolve hardened as, very gingerly and painstakingly she inched further and further down the stone wall, refusing to allow herself to look at the ground below. As she set her feet on the dew-soaked grass, she was aware that the light around the annexe was increasing and somehow this comforted her as she turned to face the slow rising of Yousai's gleaming sun.

"As if you've come to fight *with* me." She murmured, pausing for a moment to push her hands together in prayer. "Tsunami, we need to be a team, this time. What we're going to do scares me, but we must do it all the same. No matter what happens, we have to do this for Jurai."

"*I almost believe your conviction.*" Ramia's voice whispered through her senses once more. "*But the barrier around Tounochi is weakening, Princess Sasami. Your Uncle's Jurai magic won't hold it there very much longer. I shall break free, and your Goddess will help me. You keep fighting, but it's to no avail. And when I am free, the first thing I will take pleasure in is destroying those people you keep around you. The knights, that lord, and that wretched space pirate who claims kinship with me. I will kill them all because you love them, as punishment for your constant and ongoing rebellion against my will.*"

"You have to win first, Ramia!" Sasami exclaimed, but there was no response, and the Princess sighed, suddenly exhausted as she sank back against the wall of the annexe.

"I have to find some strength from somewhere." She murmured. "Tsunami can't be drained that easily, surely? Maybe if I went to her shrine — perhaps I'd find some kind of solace there. Even if her spirit is inside of me, maybe it would help somehow. I really don't know."

To think was to act,and she padded carefully across the damp terrain, pushing open the door of the main building and heading down the steep steps to the place where she knew the secret shrine was located. She met few guards on her way, and noone questioned her presence, recognising her immediately as the Lady Sasami, Yousai's honoured guest. At the door she halted, eying the engravings with a sombre expression. Then she pushed it open, stepping carefully between the benches and the offering places as she approached the shrine itself.

As she did so, something caught her eye and she turned, a gasp of consternation escaping her lips as she registered what lay in the temple's ante-chamber. Hesitantly she approached it, tears fresh in her eyes once more as she observed the silent, sleeping body of her faithful noble escort.

“Yurikage-sama.” She murmured, flickering her hands over his body almost automatically as she said a silent prayer for his soul. “Tsunami is sorry for the sacrifice you made. And I am grateful, Lord Motonoya. I won’t forget you or what you’ve done. I promise, it won’t have been in vain. You will be avenged, somehow. I just wish I wasn’t so dizzy and could think more clearly! I wish I had Tenchi or Ayeka or Ryoko to help me… I don’t like fighting battles on my own!”

She sighed, leaning up against the wall and closing her eyes as her surroundings began to swim and distort, teasing at her vision and making her unsteadiness worse. She knew that it was a combination of her own weakness and Ramia’s taunting spells, but it did not make it easier to fight, and at length she clenched her fists, gritting her teeth as she focused her energy on Tsunami’s own far-reaching magic.

“You’ve let me see them before, the people to whom you’re connected.” She murmured. “I know you’re hurt, Tsunami. I know you’re weak and you’re not yourself. But a little part of you is still in me, I know that’s true. And as long as I have that, I must be able to use your strength as my own, right? So please, tell me where my family are. Tenchi and Ryoko and the others. I need them. I need their help. I don’t think I can do this on my own.”

For a moment there was nothing, and Sasami sighed, half-convinced that her own inexperience was only adding to Tsunami’s own confusion. Then, from the depths of her mind, she felt a faint flickering and she screwed her eyes up tight, focusing on it with all her might. As she did so, a silhouette hovered briefly in her mind’s eye, the glitter of white magic surrounding his body, and Sasami bit her lip, pushing her strength towards him as she looked for his comfort and his support.

“Tenchi-niichan.” She murmured. “Please help me. Please. I know you can. Wherever you are, I need you. You’ve always been Tsunami’s knight — Tenchi, wherever you are, I need to find you!”

There was a sudden flare of light, and Sasami let out a cry as it blazed through her, almost searing right through her heart and soul as it engulfed her in its power. She felt her body twist and turn away from the funerary bier and away from the dark, silent chapel that held so many ghosts and secrets. For a moment she felt like she was falling, and then, with a hard thump, she made contact with the ground, struggling to bring her whirling thoughts back into shape as she opened her eyes.

“*Sasami*?”

From somewhere in the melee, Sasami picked out Tenchi's voice and she blinked, struggling to bring her surroundings into focus.

"Tenchi-niichan?" She whispered. "Did I find you? Are you here?"

"That's the girl who was outside! The one on the street, who Ryoko and the others fought against." A second voice spoke now, and Sasami tried to place it, but failed. A strong arm hauled her carefully into a sitting position, supporting her trembling body as it did so and as she finally managed to bring the world back into focus, she was aware of two dark brown eyes gazing down at her in concern.

"Tenchi. It *is* you." Sasami sighed, as relief coursed through her, and she leant up against him, comforted by the man who she had always considered an honorary elder brother.

"Yes, but what are you doing here and how did you get here in the first place?" Tenchi asked her. "You're shaking like a leaf, Sasami-chan, and you're burning up. You should be resting — I thought Kamidake and Azaka were keeping close tabs on you?"

"They were. But I slipped out a different way." Sasami gripped him by the hands. "Tenchi, I want to stop Ramia. I have to. Tsunami and I — we have to fight back. But I'm so… so tired now. And…"

She faltered, as a sudden sense of nausea washed over her, and Tenchi hugged her tightly.

"You should rest and let Washu and the others worry about Ramia." He said softly. "You're doing enough keeping Tsunami at bay, Sasami-chan. You shouldn't push yourself harder than you can manage, you know."

"You really *are* just a kid, aren't you?" A strange face loomed over her at that moment, and Sasami stared up at him uncomprehendingly. "No older than that Misao girl. Gee, how quickly do kids grow up in outer space, anyway, Masaki?"

"Kids like Sasami and Misao? Far too soon." Tenchi said grimly. "It's all right, Sasami. This is Hiroshi Ikeda, and he's a friend of mine from the Earth. He won't hurt you. And the girl over there is Sakura Ito — likewise someone I go to college with. They got messed up in this quite by accident, but they're trustworthy, I swear."

"Friends of yours from Earth?" Sasami looked blank. Tenchi nodded.

"Maybe if I made her some tea, it would help?" Sakura offered. "She looks so fragile, poor thing — she really doesn't look at all well."

“Yes, and someone should go and tell Azaka and Kamidake that she’s here, although why she is is anyone’s guess.” Tenchi agreed. “Any volunteers for playing messenger? They’ll worry, when they find her gone.”

“We could try this radio thing that Tennan guy showed us.” Hiroshi suggested, flickering his fingers speculatively across the switches on the Unko’s dashboard and pressing several of them in quick succession. “I think I saw how to work it.”

Almost as soon as he’d finished speaking, a red light glimmered on and off across the control panel, and squirts of water shot out from the bases of the windscreen, splattering the perspex liberally with their cleansing fluid. Sakura snorted.

“Yes, you definitely have it down, Ikeda.” She said teasingly. “I don’t think you should do that again. Tennan-san isn’t the kind of person you want to make angry, and he seems to like his spaceship.”

“That’s odd.” Hiroshi frowned, slipping off his glasses as he squinted at the buttons. “I was sure that was it. My uncle’s car does the same thing, though. You try and switch on the radio and it washes the windows. I guess it’s a design flaw.”

“Yes, in your brain.” Sakura sighed. “Just let it alone, will you? We’ll find another way to contact Azaka and Kamidake. Blowing up this ship might get people’s attention, but I’m not really sure I want to die because you don’t know what you’re pressing.”

At that moment, Ryo Ohki hopped down from the pipe on which she had been sleeping, rubbing up against Sasami and uttering a miaow. She glanced at Tenchi, cocking her head on one side, and Tenchi nodded, relief glittering in his expression.

“Good plan. You tell Ryoko, and she can tell the Knights.” He agreed. “Thanks, Ryo Ohki. I’d forgotten you were here, you curled yourself up so well.”

Ryo Ohki flicked her ears indignantly at this, but she settled herself more comfortably on the ground, resting her head on her paws as she concentrated on sending her message. Absently Sasami reached across to scratch beneath the cabbit’s chin, and Ryo Ohki let out a contented purr, hopping up onto her lap.

“An old friend of yours, I see, Ryo Ohki.” Sakura knelt at Sasami’s side at this moment, offering her a warm mug of green tea, which Sasami eyed doubtfully. “It’s all right. I promise. It’s not too hot.”

“Thank you.” Sasami took it gingerly, sipping at it.

“Why did you come to me, Sasami-chan?” Tenchi asked softly. “There must be a reason. How did you know we were on board Seiryo-sama’s ship, anyway?”

“Seiryo’s…?” Sasami gazed around her, a slight smile touching her lips as she recognised her surroundings.

“I hadn’t realised.” She admitted. “I just thought of where you were, and I came here. Tsunami helped, though she’s confused, Tenchi. Hurt and sick and not herself at all. Ramia keeps plaguing her, and something in the witch’s magic makes her weak and unable to keep control of her own actions. I… I remember when we went to Kihaku, Tsunami used the magic from the knights to power her, and make her strong enough to save you, Mihoshi and Tokimi before the planet blew up. So… so I put my mind to the strongest person I knew, because… because I hoped…”

She trailed off, and Tenchi sighed, slowly shaking his head.

“I don’t have my magic at the moment. Tsunami’s weakness has weakened me, too.” He said sadly. “I’m sorry, Sasami. If I could give it you, I would in a heartbeat. But I can’t even muster up sword Tenchi at the moment.”

“I see.” Sasami’s heart sank, and she set the mug of tea aside. “Then I guess I’m on my own, aren’t I?”

“That’s the last thing you should be, in this condition.” Sakura looked anxious. “Hiroshi’s right — you are a kid, and you can’t fight this demon woman on your own!”

“Maybe she could take this.” Hiroshi suggested, scooping up Yurikage’s abandoned sword in his grasp and attempting a couple of wild parries with it, almost tripping over his own feet as he did so. “Gee, its harder than it looks.”

“Lord Motonoya’s sword.” Sasami’s eyes opened wide with surprise. “Why do *you* have it? I don’t understand?”

“Lord Tennan gave it to me, in case we needed a form of defence.” Tenchi explained quietly. “Sakura, Ikeda and I have been exiled here for our own good, apparently — not that I can say I like it. The ship is comfortable enough, and probably safe enough, too. But I don’t like being away from the action. Even without my magic, I don’t like it at all.”

“Wait a minute. Hiroshi is right.” Sakura’s dark eyes lit up with sudden comprehension, and she held out her hand, taking the sword from the bemused grip of her friend. She ran a gentle finger along the

blade, pursing her lips as she considered. “Rumiya said that the blade could hurt Arian magic. Didn’t he? Isn’t that what he said, and why Tenchi has this in the first place? It did turn Misa back into Misao, too. It must be strong in some way or another. Mustn’t it?”

“Misa… back into…?” Sasami stared. “You mean she didn’t *want* to be Misa?”

“Of course not. Ramia made her — she bewitched her, just like she’s bewitching Tsunami.” Tenchi shook his head. “Misao is distraught about what’s happened — she blames herself and she’s frightened too, Sasami. She’s not to blame for any of this — she’s just being used as a puppet, just like Rumiya and just like Haki was, too.”

“Haki.” Sasami’s eyes flickered with consternation, and she nodded. “I see. I didn’t know, but I’m glad I do, now. I didn’t want my friend to be a killer again, Tenchi. After Yugi — I didn’t want that to happen to me again.”

“Misao cares about you a lot. She’s worried about you, like we are.” Tenchi assured her. “And she wants to help, although I’m not sure how she can.”

“What did you mean about the blade, Sakura?” Hiroshi asked curiously, as Sakura settled herself once more at the Princess’s side. “We don’t know a lot about this magic — what are you thinking might happen?”

“Tenchi just said that this Ramia woman has been putting spells on Sasami here too.” Sakura reasoned. “And Rumiya was sure that this sword can hurt Ramia’s magic, even if it can’t hurt it completely. Because it cut his arm, or something, and it shouldn’t have been able to. Najya-san said that the sword could hurt anyone with Arian magic, if it got too close. She seemed to think it was stronger than Ramia gave Rumiya reason to believe. What if it is?”

“Go on.” Tenchi frowned. “Explain.”

“Well, if this sword broke the spell making Misao into Misa, and it hurt Rumiya when he should have been protected, maybe it can help Sasami, too.” Sakura shrugged. “I might be talking nonsense, of course, because I really don’t understand how all this works. But it stands to reason to me that it might have some effect. Mightn’t it? I mean, Sasami’s magic is different, isn’t it? It’s not from this A..Airai place. So it shouldn’t *hurt* her. Should it?”

Tenchi’s eyes widened, and he grasped the sword out of her hand, glancing at it then up at his friend in wonder.

“You know, you might have something.” He murmured. “Sasami? What do you think?”

“I remember the blade cutting the bird’s wing.” Sasami faltered. “Do you mean the bird was… Rumiya?”

“Yes.” Tenchi agreed. “Under another of Ramia’s spells, I’m afraid.”

“It made him bleed.” Sasami said slowly. “And he seemed… startled. Yurikage-sama told me then that his blade was mined from Arian ore… commissioned by an ancestor of his. He was so proud of it… of wielding such a strong and elegant blade.”

“Then maybe Lord Motonoya is still fighting for Tsunami’s cause, after all.” Sakura said gravely. Tenchi nodded.

“He told Lord Tennan and Ryoko to keep it safe, because he knew it had some kind of effect on Ramia’s magic.” He agreed. “Sasami, I think Sakura might be right. At the very least, the sword might help you control Tsunami’s wild outbursts a little more.”

“But we can’t exactly stab her.” Hiroshi pointed out. “I’ve not seen Lord Motonoya’s body, but I’ve seen the bloody mess in that hallway — they still haven’t got rid of the stains. How exactly can we use the sword on Sasami?”

“You can’t.” Sasami glanced at the sword for a moment, then she struggled to her feet. “Not on Sasami. But on… on Tsunami. Maybe. I guess we’ll have to try it and… and see.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Sasami-chan.” Tenchi said worriedly, even as the young princess’s body glittered with light, morphing and changing into the ghostly form of the goddess, a strange prickle of energy surrounding her aura.

“Tsunami is a spirit. A physical blade can’t kill her.” The princess assured him, her fists clenched as she fought to control the will of the feral spirit that hid within her. “But I can’t always control her, either. When Tsunami takes over, at the moment, Ramia has her in her power. It’s Tsunami who needs to be set free, Tenchi-niichan. I trust you. I know you can do this.”

“But what if I hurt you?” Tenchi faltered, as the glow around the apparition intensified.

“Ramia is already hurting me.” Sasami whispered. “Please, Tenchi. Tsunami needs you to try. She’s hurting too, and Ramia might make her do something terrible again, if we don’t do something to stop her!”

Tenchi bit his lip, and a shudder of energy ran up Sasami's spine as she felt Ramia's touch coursing through Tsunami once more, spreading slowly out across her form and stifling her beneath it's cold, dark grip. She let out a gasp as Tsunami's feral rage began to overwhelm her again, struggling to hold it back, but it was beyond her tired body and as the Goddess's power grew, Sasami felt herself being pushed back into the depths of her consciousness, drowning in a dark sea of emotions as she fought to keep her head above water.

"Well, so this is interesting" She heard Tsunami say, but the voice was edged with Ramia's hard gutteral tones, and Sasami knew that Ramia's earlier warnings had been right. The barrier between them was dissipating, and as the mage grew stronger, she was forcing herself more and more into Tsunami's being, trying her best to rip them apart. "You think a piece of metal can kill me, do you? Prince of Jurai, how foolish you are. That you think such a blade could defeat us!"

There was a second shudder of magic, then,

"Your friends think you're safe here, but you're not." She whispered. "And now you're trapped, I will kill you. All of you. Don't count on Sasami to help you. She won't. Say your farewells. It's time for you to go join Lord Motonoya in his lonely temple!"

"Into *Misa*?"

Rumiya's eyes almost fell out of his head, and he stared at his companion in dismay, shaking his head firmly. "You know I won't do that, Misao-sama! You know that it might hurt you! And you don't even like Misa! She's not like you — she doesn't care about anything at all. I don't want to do that to you again… we both know what happened last time I did!"

Misao swallowed hard, nodding her head.

"I know." She said hoarsely, grasping him around the wrists. "And I'm scared. I don't know what will happen. But I *need* Misa, if I'm going to use any of my magic to stop my mother. I have to try it, Rumiya. Please. I told you, it's… it's an order. Make me Misa. Now."

Rumiya eyed her doubtfully for a moment, but at length he sighed, nodding his head reluctantly.

"All right." He said sadly. "If it's really what you want me to do… I will."

"It is." Misao nodded her head firmly. "I'm ready. Just… whatever

it is you do, I'm ready."

Rumiya sent her a melancholy glance, then he sighed again, placing his fingers under her chin gently and lifting her gaze to his as he focused his thoughts on her. Not without misgivings, Misao stood perfectly still, resisting the urge to glance away as Rumiya's powers of suggestion washed through her once more, slowly and surely teasing at her thoughts and her senses, re-ordering them one by one. A strange sensation washed over her, and for a moment she thought she was going to faint. Gritting her teeth, she held on, her grip on Rumiya's wrists tightening as she sought to keep her balance. The rest of the room seemed very far away, and the discussion over her father's letter from another lifetime, as memories and flickers of thought flashed by.

"Misa." She murmured, whetting her lips as she felt the imposing presence of another haunting her senses. "I must do this. For Sasami. For Yousai. I must."

With that she relinquished her last hold on her composure, allowing herself to fall into Rumiya's deep pool of hypnosis as she stumbled, her grip loosening as she tumbled forwards. Rumiya caught her with an exclamation, and as Misao raised her gaze to his, she felt anticipation pump through her veins, startling all her senses and rushing through to her heart.

"Misa?" Rumiya's tones were hesitant, and for a moment Misao wasn't sure how to answer, unable to put her thoughts into words. Then she pulled herself upright, excitement dancing in her eyes as she grabbed his shoulders, meeting his eyes with cheeky, coquettish amber ones of her own.

"Ru-kun." She whispered. "Well, well. It's been a while."

Rumiya sighed.

"Misao-sama asked it of me, else it would never have happened again." He said softly. "So don't hurt her, all right? She wants your help."

Misa tilted her head on one side, eying his expression for a moment. Then she dimpled, an impish light in her marigold gaze.

"Whatever you say." She murmured, flexing her fingers and slipping them around his neck. Adrenalin coursed through her, and before she knew what she was doing, she had kissed him square on the lips, letting out an amused peal of golden laughter as she registered his stunned, horrified expression.

“Really, am I that bad?” She asked teasingly. “Or would you rather be kissing Misao? Is that it? You don’t like me so much as you do her, do you, Ru-kun?”

“Misa, stop it. Stop messing around! Misao called you out for a reason, and…”

“Ru-kun.” Misa pressed her finger to his lips, shaking her head, and he stared at her, bewildered.

“What?” He demanded, pushing her arm away. “What are you playing at?”

“Nothing.” Misa shrugged her shoulders, spreading her hands in a gesture of surrender. “I just thought you should know. I’m not Misa, Ru-kun. Not this time.”

Rumiya’s jaw dropped, and he gaped at his companion as if seeing her for the first time.

“*Misao… sama*?” He whispered. Misao laughed, nodding her head.

“I’m still Misao.” She agreed. “Only… only Misa has such energy, Rumiya. Such life. Such *daring*. She wants to do and experience everything — all the things I didn’t want to experience, because I was so afraid to move beyond these walls. I’ve been so protected, so sheltered, and I’ve buried half of my soul in the process. But I don’t want to any more. I want to *know* Misa, too. And accept her for who she is.”

“Misa killed Lord Motonoya, don’t forget that.”

“No, my mother made her do that. And I did, because I isolated her into listening to what Ramia said.” Misao shook her head. “Misa and I have come to an agreement, Rumiya. We both need this body, if we’re going to live. And… and I need her strength and courage, if I’m going to have a chance against my mother. We’re both parts of the same girl, like Tsunami and Sasami are the same. And I… I really hope that if we work together, we might both wind up being freed from Ramia’s shadow. After all, Misa is just Misao’s reflection. That’s all.”

“But you… kissed me.” Rumiya swallowed hard, and Misao pinkened, nodding her head.

“I’m sorry. Misa made me do it.” She admitted, biting her lip. “I didn’t… well I wasn’t… I wanted to know what it was like, that’s all. Because I really like you a lot, Ru-kun. Only I didn’t know how to tell you, or if I should. But Misa thinks I should. And when I thought you would die — I didn’t like it. Even if we’ve both done bad things… I

don't want you not to be there. So will you come with me, now? Will you come to Tounochi and help me try and take on my mother?"

Rumiya gawked at her anew, as if trying to make out if she was joking or serious. Then he nodded his head, spreading his hands as he morphed into his bird form.

"I'll come." He said soberly, settling himself on his companion's shoulder. "After all, you're Lady of Yousai. And I wouldn't let you face Lady Ramia on your own. Let's go."

"Lady Misao!"

The shocked voice of another interrupted their conversation and Misao turned, horror sparking in her amber eyes as she registered the presence of her guardian in the doorway, Lord Hirayama in tow. "What are you doing? Is it that devil bird? Rumiya will be severely dealt with for this — Misao-sama, come back to your senses at once! Come away from that creature — don't you know he'll only do vile things to you?"

Rumiya flapped his wings, soaring high into the rafters of the building as the nobleman drew his sword, squinting upwards as he sought his quarry, and Misao let out an exclamation, grabbing the sword from his grasp and sending it clattering across the room.

"No!" She exclaimed. "Leave Rumiya alone! *Leave him alone*!"

"Lady Misao, you don't know what you're saying. The spell, it's confusing you. You're not yourself — you don't know who you are!" Daisuke objected, anxiety in his expression as he grabbed his young charge securely by the shoulders. "Wandering this building at all hours, shutting yourself away… this is the trauma of events taking their toll on your poor delicate body. All of this… my poor Misao, what has it done to you?"

"Let *go* of me, Ojisama!" Misao's eyes flashed with impatience, and she pushed him back, swiping his hands from her body as she moved out of his reach. "I'm not confused. Not at all. I'm *fine*!"

"Fine? Looking like that?" Lord Hirayama put in at that moment. "Lady Misao, you can't know your own mind. The demon is inside of you again — the demon of Tounochi!"

"Misa is *not* a demon!" Misao put her hands on her hips. "She's part of me! The part of me you encouraged me never to face, because you were scared of my mother and her legacy! You knew she was bound in that tower, but you wouldn't have told me if I hadn't have overheard you talking! And you don't talk about my Arian heritage, like it's

something dirty and evil. But I've met Najya-sama now, and I know that it isn't. It isn't! It's how you choose to use that heritage, not who you were born to or how you were born! I'm not Ramia-sama and Misa is a part of Misao! She's not Ramia at all, Ojisama! She's Misao Amano, and noone else!"

"Lady Misao, please…"

"Stop it! Shut up and listen to me! Please!" Misao cut across him, causing Daisuke to stop dead, staring at her in dismay. "I am Lady of Yousai. I am not delicate or fragile. I can't be. You've just made me that way because you were afraid of what would happen to me. You never let me leave this place. You never let me question anything, and I grew up being afraid. Afraid and alone, Oshima-sama! Rumiya and Sasami are the first real friends I ever had, and I love both of them dearly. Both of them have been hurt by my mother, and I won't let that happen again. So I'm going to do something about it!"

"Misao." Daisuke bit his lip. "My child, we only acted in your interests. You are young, and your father… he loved you so much. As do we, my child. We love you dearly, and if harm came to you…"

"I know that." Misao's tones softened, and she nodded her head. "But I am Lady of Yousai now, aren't I? That's what all of this is about?"

"Well, yes, but…"

"Then as Lady of Yousai, I'm going to do what my Father would have wanted, and protect my people. However I can." Misao said firmly. "Even if I'm scared. Even if it's dangerous. I have to."

"Misao-chan." Daisuke frowned, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder. For a moment, Misao thought he was going to argue with her, then very slowly he nodded.

"He would have been proud of you, if he could have heard those words." He said softly. "Young as you are, you truly are his daughter, Misao-chan."

Misao dimpled, flinging her arms around her guardian at this and hugging him tightly.

"Thank you." She murmured. "I'll be all right — at least, I'll try to be. And Rumiya is coming with me. He's not evil, Ojisama. Really, he isn't. He's been a prisoner of my mother's magic too, that's all. But he wants to help and I trust him. So promise me you won't hurt him, even when all this is over. None of it has been his fault… and I don't want him to go away."

At this, the parrot descended from the beams, flexing his feathers as he hovered at Misao's side. Daisuke sighed, shaking his head.

"I must obey my Lady's will." He said at length. "As you wish, Misao-sama."

Delight flickered in Misao's eyes, and as she gazed up at her guardian's tired, anxious face, she saw surprise cross his expression.

"What?" She asked, startled. "Is something wrong?"

"No." Daisuke shook his head. "Just… your eyes, Misao-chan. They were gold… but now they're not. They're your father's eyes. Strange as you still look, with hair like gold… you have your father's look about you, just as I always knew you would."

"Lord Oshima is right." Rumiya agreed, flicking the tips of his wings as if to illustrate his point. "Misao-sama, your eyes are aquamarine again."

"Really?" Misao faltered for a moment, then she smiled.

"I'm glad." She said softly. "I always liked that I had my father's eyes."

She held out her hand to the bird, and Rumiya fluttered down onto it, settling his feathers more comfortably as he stabilised his perch.

"Then we'll go." She added. "Ojisama, I'm leaving you in charge here. I have to go and try and help put Yousai to rights!"

"*Tenchi*!"

Ryoko sat bolt upright in bed, fear flickering across her senses as she tossed back her covers, clambering to her feet and grabbing her robe from its hook beside the dresser. Ryo Ohki's thought patterns buzzed and whirled through her mind, conveying both fear and apprehension and the pirate grimaced, struggling to separate her own emotions from the rising hysteria of her spaceship companion.

"Tsunami." She muttered. "On the Unko. And I thought that was supposed to be safe! What's she doing there, Ryo Ohki? What's happening — can you tell me?"

A bevy of images assailed her senses at this, and she bit her lip as she tried to assemble them into some kind of order.

"Sasami went to Tenchi for help, but it backfired." She whispered. "Right. I'll be with you in a second, Ryo Ohki. Hang on in there. I'll

come right to you."

A second wave of images flitted across their psychic bond, and Ryoko, who had been about to teleport out to the landing bay paused, her brow creasing in consternation.

"You don't want me to come alone." She realised. "You think I should get Washu or Najya to come with me — is Tsunami that out of control? But what if she hurts Tenchi in the meantime? Ryo Ohki, don't be so stupid. I can teleport in and teleport all of you out of there in an instant. Noone has to fight Tsunami at all — and then they'll be safe."

"Why are you talking to yourself, Ryoko?"

A sleepy voice from the doorway alerted the pirate to the fact she had company, and Ryoko frowned, glaring at her mother impatiently.

"How long have you been there?"

"Since you clattered out of bed at a great rate of knots. I know my daughter, and Najya and I are only a floor above you, thanks to the Yousai Council's hurried accommodation arrangements." Washu stifled a yawn, stepping into the chamber as she did so, and Ryoko could see that her mother was also attired only in her nightwear, her thick red hair bound back for the night and her robe tied loosely around her waist. Behind her, the pirate made out the shimmering outline of the scientist's old friend, and she sighed, shaking her head impatiently.

"So what exactly has you panicking? Ryo Ohki?" Washu asked. "I know your reactions too well — were you going to go somewhere dangerous without us?"

"Tsunami is on the Unko and Tenchi and the others need our help." Ryoko snapped. "We can waste time yattering or we can go and help them. I don't care what you're doing, but I'm going aboard that tin-can spaceship and I'm going to get my fiancé and my friends out of there before Sasami's other half makes mincemeat of them. All right with you?"

"Tsunami." Najya looked troubled. "I was afraid that our spell wouldn't last, Washu. I gave it all the strength I could, but Tsunami was resisting my help all the way. I suppose Ramia has regained control."

"Perhaps the barrier around Tounochi has weakened further." Washu mused. "All right, Ryoko. We're coming with you, so stop fretting. Tenchi's friends are my responsibility, anyway. I chose to

bring them here, and even with Yurikage-sama's Arian sword to help, I doubt that any of them are much of a match for a Goddess on the rampage."

"Finally." Ryoko muttered. "All right. But we're not going to hurt Sasami, are we? Last time it hurt Sasami… I don't want to kill her by mistake."

"We'll do just as you said, Ryoko. We'll go in and get them out." Najya assured her softly. "I can probably distract Ramia's rage enough anyway for you and Washu to do just that. And I think I can hold my own against my Saotome counterpart, at least for a short time."

"Then we're still wasting time." Ryoko snapped, tying her gown more tightly around her waist. "Let's go."

She closed her eyes, focusing her energy on the Unko, but then she frowned, confusion flooding her senses.

"Well? What's wrong, musume-chan?" Washu asked softly.

"I… can't." Ryoko cast her mother a confused glance. "I can't teleport. I can't get there. Something's keeping me out."

"Tsunami's magic? Ramia? Your Saotome blood?" Najya frowned. "I can't transmit myself there either, so maybe it's like Lord Azusa's barrier. Maybe it blocks out Arian blood. Washu, what about you? You're not Arian in the least. Can *you* reach the ship?"

Washu closed her eyes, and for a moment there was silence. Then she opened them again, shaking her head.

"It's not because either of you have Arian blood. I can't get in, either." She murmured. "It's as if Tsunami is keeping us at bay."

"To protect us, or to keep us from helping Tenchi?" Ryoko bit her lip. "Dammit, does she think it's that simple? If we can't teleport, we can always walk, and the sooner we go, the sooner we get there. Come *on*!"

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

“This isn’t good, is it?”

As Tsunami’s flickering, malevolent form drew closer to them, Sakura bit her lip, sending Tenchi an apprehensive, frightened glance. “I mean, she really means it, doesn’t she? She didn’t manage to kill us the last time, but this time she’s not making any mistakes!”

“You’re smart.” Tsunami nodded her head, her eyes shimmering amber as she surveyed her prey with a slight, forbidding smile. “There’s no Najya Akara to protect you this time, Earth girl. Nor your weak, pathetic friends. And as for the Prince of Jurai…”

She flicked her fingers in Tenchi’s direction, letting out a peal of amused laughter.

“Sasami loves him like a brother.” She murmured. “She sought him when she was desperate, hoping to raise his help. Instead she’s brought about his demise. Do you hear that, Sasami? I know you do. Your desire to bring me down is flawed, and it will cost you the blood of those you love! Didn’t I warn you of this once before? You can’t defeat me. I will take Tsunami’s magic from you completely, and the more you fight me, the more I’ll make you suffer!”

“Leave Sasami alone!” Tenchi scrambled unsteadily to his feet, gripping the hilt of Yurikage’s sword tightly in his grasp as he did so. “She’s done nothing to you, so leave her alone! She’s just a child, Ramia! No older than your own daughter, Misao. Would you see her so badly treated? Would you stand for that?”

“I don’t care about Misao and I don’t care about Sasami.” Ramia glared at him coldly, and for a moment Tsunami’s hair glimmered with a reddish sheen. “Every minute I gain more ground inside this tired, weak being. Tsunami is the universe’s greatest, is she? Well, let me tell you a story, Prince of Jurai. Your planet has long feared our people, because of how our magic weaves its way through people’s souls and bends them to our will. Tsunami has fought Airai’s magic once before… or did you forget the legend of the Dark Prince Kagato?”

“I slew Kagato!” Tenchi shot back, summoning all his strength as he held the sword aloft. It seemed heavy and unwieldy in his grip,

different from the light and easy Juraian sword that was usually a mere extension of his will and he frowned, focusing his concentration on keeping the sword in hand.

“Yes, maybe you did.” Ramia’s eyes flickered at this, and she eyed him thoughtfully. “He was half-blooded. Weak. Reliant on Tsunami’s existence for his own, and that was his downfall. He was doomed to fail, as my father predicted he would. And yet, his legacy showed us that Jurai’s magic is not invincible. The legendary Jurai Power that has made your world the great Imperial planet that it is has weaknesses. And even if Kagato could not exploit them, I have no such restrictions. I am all Arian — a mage born and bred of the Saotome line, and the heiress of my father, Masaru. If I slay Tsunami, so be it. My life and hers are not connected… and I will feel no grief at the death of the world known as Jurai.”

“You’re insane!” Hiroshi exclaimed. “Stark raving bananas! What in hell use is this Tsunami going to be to you if you kill her, you nutjob? Surely that defeats the object?”

“Ikeda, shut up.” Tenchi snapped. “Take Sakura and Ryo Ohki and get out of harm’s way, all right? And for God’s sake, don’t antagonise her. If she kills Tsunami, Jurai’s imperial family also die. What do you suppose that means for all the planets dependant on Juraian protection?”

“The Prince has more sense than you do, Earthling.” The golden eyes narrowed, flickering cold fire as they surveyed Hiroshi and despite himself the student shivered, cowering back against Unko’s control panel. “I don’t seek revenge on Jurai, and it matters little to me if Tsunami dies while serving my purpose. My interests are in Airai, and the future prosperity of my people. The Saotome have great power, as you might have already realised. With Jurai gone, can you imagine how easily we could slip into these worlds, taking them and their riches for ourselves? The possibilities are endless. Airai’s ancient empire would once more thrive and grow under our stewardship.”

Her eyes flickered again.

“Not everything in this universe depends on Tsunami for life.”

“I think you’re a monster.” Sakura said quietly. “And I don’t think that anyone would let you take their worlds over so easily as that. You think you’re powerful, but Hiroshi is right. You’re crazy. Maybe it made you crazy, I don’t know. But from what I’ve seen of magic — I’m glad I don’t have any to worry about.”

“*Silence*.” Tsunami raised her hand in Sakura’s direction, light

glimmering from the tips, but with a fierce, shrieking yowl Ryo Ohki launched herself from the top of the ship's control panel, hissing and spitting as she clawed wildly at the Goddess's ethereal form. Much to Tenchi's surprise, Tsunami flinched momentarily, and his eyes widened as he considered what this might mean. As Ryo Ohki sank her sharp white teeth into Tsunami's arm, droplets of bright red blood scattered themselves across the Unko's floor, and the apparition let out a yell of rage, swinging her arm sharply as she tried to shake her assailant free. Ryo Ohki was persistant, determination flickering in her amber eyes, but as the light intensity around Tsunami's body increased, the cabbit howled, dropping to the floor as the magic repelled her. She was on her feet again in a moment, back arched and ears flattened as she put herself between the Earthlings and their attacker, and Tenchi bit his lip, glancing at Yurikage's sword.

"Ryo Ohki drew blood. Tsunami's still part human, even if Ramia is trying her best to separate them." He murmured. "She's still Sasami. And I have to try and get her out of there. But if I stab her, I'll kill Sasami. I don't want to hurt her… what can I do? And with this sword? I wish I had mine. I wish I was at full strength! It's taking all that I have just to hold it — but I can't just stand here. Ryo Ohki's not afraid to fight, so I mustn't be either. Sasami-chan needs me. I keep telling people I'm more than just a Prince of Jurai. Well, Masaki, it's time you proved it."

With that thought he, set his teeth, moving to stand beside Ryo Ohki as he held the sword aloft.

"I won't let you hurt Hiroshi or Sakura." He said quietly. "And I won't let you harm Sasami any more. Ramia, you don't belong here. You're a parasite and you're sucking away Tsunami's strength. You think you can weaken everyone with Jurai blood that way, and your ambitions get crazier by the second. But not everyone with Jurai blood is Juraian — or did you forget that? I was born on the Earth. My father is an Earthling. And you can't do anything about that, now can you?"

"You're barely able to stand up. Sweat beads across your brow and you have the look of death already upon you." Tsunami was scornful, reaching out a ghostly finger towards him as she eyed him disparagingly. "To kill you would be a mercy. You pitiful Prince — do you think your words mean anything to me?"

"No, but then, I don't mean to spend much longer talking." Tenchi snapped back, gathering himself as he fixed her with a defiant expression. "I'm not as weak as you think I am. People of the Earth

don't give up, when someone they care about is in danger. They keep going, even if it seems to be hopeless. So I'll keep going. I'm not going to give up. And I'm going to do whatever I can to *stop* you, even if it means you kill me."

"Or you kill your Princess, perhaps?"

For a moment, Sasami's image flickered in the depths of the Goddess's white magic, and Tenchi faltered, then strengthened his resolve.

"She asked me to." He murmured. "Sasami-chan, hang on. I'm not going to let her carry this on any longer. We're going to stop this, once and for all!"

With a tremendous yell he charged at his opponent, wielding Yurikage's blade before him as he launched himself at the protective white light that encircled Tsunami's form. As the metal blade made contact with the Goddess's aura, Tenchi felt a burning sensation rush through his body, and he gasped, almost loosing hold of the weapon with the sudden shock of it. Then, as the sensation subsided, he realised that the flare of light around Tsunami's form had flickered and faded slightly, and he bit his lip, glancing at Yurikage's sword once more.

"Lord Motonoya, you told my fiancée that this sword could hurt them." He muttered. "I never met you, and I don't know what kind of a man you were — but I do believe you cared about Sasami and her well-being enough to give your life for her. You believed your sword could protect her… so so will I."

"Get back from me, you worm! Don't you know I can extinguish your life with a mere thought?" Tsunami demanded, but there was an anxiety about her now, and as Tenchi gazed at her, he saw her eyes flicker from amber to their more familiar deep fuschia. "You can't hurt me with that toy! Yurikage Motonoya was a fool and so are you… he died because of it, and so will you!"

"Yurikage Motonoya wasn't a fool. Yurikage Motonoya was a brave and loyal man who loved his Princess." Tenchi said firmly, surging forward again as he felt new strength creep up through his body and his limbs, making the sword feel lighter and less cumbersome in his grip. "He sacrificed his existence to protect something he believed in. Something which anyone who cares about his friends would do in a heartbeat!"

At this, the blade began to glow, emitting a soft topaz light as it grew slowly stronger and more vibrant. Little by little, the gentle haze

spread through the entire sword, touching Tenchi's fingers as it gently wrapped him in its protective light. Tenchi stared in wonder at his weapon, and for a moment he almost imagined he saw the face of a man reflected in the sword's shining silver blade. Then, in an instant, the illusion was gone, and in a flash, Tenchi understood.

"The sword is blessed." He murmured. "Yurikage had faith in it to protect Sasami, so it is. It's almost as if it's alive. Almost as if… as if somehow his spirit was still guiding it, even though he's no longer here."

Somehow this thought gave him renewed strength, and he forged forwards again, slicing at Tsunami's protective barrier with a decisive, sweeping blow. It crackled and dissipated beneath the touch of the weapon, and Tenchi found that he was within inches of the apparition herself.

"Yurikage-sama used the sword to bring Misao from her trance, but without hurting her." He murmured. "So there must be a way. I wonder…"

He glanced at the sword, then swung it over in his hands until the flat of the blade faced upwards. With a cry, he wielded his weapon against Tsunami's body, the side of the instrument colliding with her skin as she let out a screech of pain and rage, her white forcefield flickering and dying as the false Wings of the Light Hawk exploded one by one into a cascade of amber light. Tenchi felt a tremendous surge rush through him, as the sword made contact with the spectre's form a second time, and as it did so, he thought that there was another presence guiding the blade once more.

As the flare of ethereal magic subsided, the Goddess's form morphed and shimmered back into that of Sasami and the Princess stumbled to her knees, drawing her breath in hasty, ragged gasps. As she did so, she rubbed absently at her arm, and Ryo Ohki leapt forward, all hostility gone as she sought to make amends for her own vicious attack. Sasami did not seem cross, however, merely stroking the cabbit's soft fur, and Tenchi was sure that he heard his young friend whisper "Thank you" as the creature rubbed affectionately up against Sasami's palm.

Tenchi bit his lip, eying the sword as its own strange light flickered and faded into nothing, and a faint smile touched his lips.

"And thank *you*, Lord Motonoya." He murmured. "Lady Sasami owes you one."

"Sasami-chan?"

Sakura hurried forwards, heedless of the danger as she reached out her hands to the huddled form on the ground. “Are you all right? Are you hurt? Did Tenchi…?”

“I’m all right.” Sasami raised her head, and Tenchi was relieved to see a little of the old sparkle returned to Sasami’s eyes. She took Sakura’s proffered hands, allowing the Earthling to pull her gently to her feet. Then she flung herself on Tenchi, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you.” She whispered. “From both Tsunami and I. Ramia is gone, Tenchi. You drove her out. I thought you said your magic was gone — but I guess you were wrong.”

“It wasn’t my magic, Sasami.” Tenchi shook his head, hesitating, then holding the sword out to her. “It was Lord Motonoya’s.”

“Yurikage-sama?” Sasami stared, then gingerly and almost reverently, she took the weapon from his grip. “Really?”

“I’m sure of it.” Tenchi nodded. “Whether he was really with me or not, I don’t know. But his belief in his sword and its ability to protect you is what allowed me to help you, I’m sure of that. It’s like Sakura said before. He really was still fighting for the Lady Sasami.”

“I see.” Tears touched Sasami’s lashes, and her crimson eyes softened. Slowly and sombrely she bowed her head in deference to the dead lord, gently setting his weapon down on the Unko’s control panel as she placed her hands together over it, uttering a soft prayer as she did so.

“Thank you, Yurikage-sama.” She murmured at length. “Tsunami is in your debt, now and always.”

“Tenchi! *Tenchi*?”

At that moment the door of the Unko drive room burst open to reveal Ryoko, the ties of her robe flying loose as she hurried inside. “What’s happening? Ryo Ohki said… what’s going on?”

“Ryoko, you’re wearing your nightclothes.” Tenchi blinked, and Ryoko looked impatient, putting her hands on her hips.

“I come here all worried about you, and all you can say is that I’m not dressed for battle?” She demanded. “I thought Tsunami was going to *kill* you!”

“No, it was under control.” Tenchi smiled, casting Sasami a smile, which the young Princess returned.

“We had help.” She murmured. “From Lord Motonoya. Ryoko, I

think Ramia's spell over Tsunami has been broken. I feel… different. Like whatever's been trying to hurt me is suddenly gone. I feel a lot better… thanks to Tenchi and Lord Motonoya's sword."

"That sword again." Ryoko's gaze strayed to the control panel. "I guess it was more powerful than Ramia thought."

"More likely *Prince Tenchi* was more powerful than Ramia thought." That was Najya, and Tenchi turned, seeing the mage and her scientist companion enter the drive room, both also attired in their nightclothes and robes. "I'm glad to find you all safe. We were worried… Tsunami — or Ramia, acting through her — had put a barrier around the Unko and we couldn't get here any faster."

"What exactly happened, Tenchi?" Washu asked gently. "You look a little… shell-shocked."

"I'm not sure you'd even believe me." Tenchi admitted. "All I know is that the sword… *knew* I wanted to help Tsunami. That's all."

"Yurikage-sama blessed it in Tsunami's shrine before we left Jurai." Sasami remembered. "Maybe that's why."

"No." Najya moved across the ship's drive room, pausing a healthy distance from the weapon as she ran her gaze over the ornate, gleaming blade. "No, I don't think it's that simple. The metal counteracts Arian elemental magic. It dampens it. But in weak hands, it's no kind of a weapon against a mage like Ramia. Lord Motonoya may have been a fine swordsman — I never met him, so I have no way to know. But if his blow against Rumiya only wounded the boy, he probably wasn't strong enough a fighter to really wield his blade."

She hesitated, then turned, casting Tenchi a smile.

"You, on the other hand, slew the Dark Prince, Kagato." She added. "You are Tsunami's knight, are you not? You have the Light Hawk Wings, just like Tsunami herself?"

"Only three." Tenchi looked self-conscious. "And I'm not even sure I have them all of the time."

"Nevertheless, you *are* the grandson of Lord Yosho. The great grandson of Lord Azusa… a child of the direct Jurai line, and, I imagine, a pretty good swordsman." Najya dimpled. "To wield Prince Yosho's sword, you'd have to be a pretty fearsome fighter. In your hands, Prince Tenchi, that weapon came to life. It showed its true potential."

"But Tenchi didn't have any Juraian magic at the time." Ryoko

objected.

“I think what Najya means is that there’s more to Tenchi than meets the eye.” Washu said softly. “We all know that’s true, too. It’s not just Jurai’s power that makes him Tsunami’s knight. It’s who he is, too, right to the core of his very spirit. It’s an interesting premise, and it makes me wonder all the more about what kind of power those from the Earth truly wield. I’m curious about this sword too, now. This Arian blade. Tenchi, when we have time, I’d like to know more about what exactly happened here today. Even study it a little.”

“The blade goes back to Jurai and Lord Motonoya’s family, when this is over.” Najya said firmly. “It’s not something which should be around anyone with Arian magic, and Washu, your daughter is also Kagato’s daughter. It could prove dangerous to her, if you were to take it back to the Earth with you.”

“All right.” Washu sighed. “Fine. But I do want to know, Tenchi. Everything. When we’ve got some time.”

“Right now, time is something we don’t have.” Ryoko muttered. Sakura bit her lip.

“The light around the tower was getting less.” She remembered. “Do you think — could it break down completely?”

“It could, if something isn’t done to strengthen it.” Washu grimaced. “Sasami, that’s where you come in. If you have any strength left, Ramia needs the locks changed on her cage door.”

“No, she needs to be dealt with, once and for all. Or all this might happen again.” Sasami said sadly.

“Princess Sasami is right.” Najya bit her lip. “Ramia’s magic is strengthening. Even though she’s been pushed out of Tsunami, she’s still a formidable enemy and a threat to everyone. And there’s another problem, too. Something else we need to consider.”

“Something else?” Tenchi looked alarmed. “What do you mean? What now?”

“Misao.” Najya looked grim. “I can sense Ramia’s magic as strongly as I can sense my own, and I can feel another, too. Another Saotome, heading towards the Tower of Blood.”

“*What*?” Washu’s eyes opened wide with alarm. “Are you saying that Misao is going to confront her mother — on her own?”

“I can’t think of any other explanation.” Najya agreed grimly. “I think Misao wants an end to this, one way or another. But I don’t

know if she's even half strong enough to take on Ramia."

"She'll be killed!" Ryoko exclaimed.

Sasami shook her head.

"I won't let her be." She said firmly, and as she spoke, her body was bathed in soft white energy. "Misao is my friend and I won't let that woman hurt her."

"Sasami, you can't be serious. You've been fighting a fever and you're in no state to…" Washu began, but Sasami shook her head.

"Washu, I'm fine. Really. I am." She assured her friend. "I feel much better, thanks to Tenchi and… and Yurikage-sama's sword. And Tsunami… she and I, we have to go help Misao. She might not be strong enough to take on Ramia, but I think… I think maybe we are."

As she spoke, the aura that surrounded her body shimmered faintly, and then, one by one the Wings of the Light Hawk spread out in a shield around her, glittering with a pure, ethereal light.

"Ten." Washu's face broke into a smile, and she held up her hands. "All right, Sasami-kami-sama. I bow to the Goddess's will."

"Ten?" Sakura blinked.

"Spider legs. Remember?" Hiroshi grinned at her. "Washu said before that she didn't have enough. Now she does."

"Is that a good thing? I mean, it's okay for her to have them now?" Sakura asked hesitantly. Tenchi nodded.

"If Sasami is in control of them, yes." He assured them. "Sasami-chan, is there anything any of us can do to help you?"

Sasami sighed, then she shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm not really good at making all these decision things." She admitted honestly. "I just know what I have to do for Misao, I don't know about anything else. But there are a lot of people here. And I don't want anyone else to get killed because of Ramia's silly greed. So…"

"So we'll make sure noone does." Najya said softly, bowing her head in acknowledgement. "Don't worry, Princess. We'll do our best."

Sasami eyed her for a moment, then she smiled, reaching out her hand and grasping Najya playfully around the wrist.

"Ramia said you were a demon, but if you're a friend of Washu's, I know you're on our side." She said warmly. "You defended Ryo Ohki

too, when Tsunami was out of my control. Are you from Airai too? Tsunami thinks so — she's sure that's why Ramia hated you so much."

"Yes." Najya agreed. "But I promise, I'm here only to help. Not to harm."

"I believe you." Sasami dimpled. "Tsunami's glad you stopped her hurting Ryo Ohki. Ryo-chan and I… we've been friends a long time. And I wouldn't have liked it, if we'd hurt Washu or Tenchi or anyone else, either. So I'm grateful, too. Thank you, Najya-san. If I can repay you, I will."

Najya looked startled, then she smiled.

"All I seek is peaceful relations between my world and Jurai." She said simply. "And until Ramia and her people are no longer a threat, that won't be possible."

"Then I'm going to go help Misao, and hopefully, resolve this whole thing." Sasami sighed, glancing at her hands. "All right, Tsunami. Let's go."

With that she flickered and vanished, and Ryoko sighed, slowly shaking her head.

"Can she really be okay, after all she's been through? Should we go with her?" She asked hesitantly.

"It might be as well to keep an eye on Tounochi, though for the time being, I think we should let her have her way." Washu said thoughtfully. "Sasami seemed much more herself, Ryoko. In fact… in fact, she seemed much *more* than herself, in some ways. I've never seen her wield Tsunami's magic so easily, nor have I seen her call on the Light Hawk Wings without first letting Tsunami take charge of her body. Our little Princess is becoming very powerful… and she has to work out for herself what the limits of those powers are."

"I have faith in her." Tenchi said quietly. "My strength is returning too, Washu, so I think that sword really did expel Ramia's influence from Tsunami. Or maybe it was my Jurai Power. I don't know. It seemed like… like Yurikage-sama's spirit was there with me, guiding the blade in Sasami's defence. I don't know how else to explain it, but that's how it seemed."

"Well, well." Washu ran her finger over the metal of the blade, eying it thoughtfully. "I wonder. Perhaps his devotion to his Princess transcended death itself."

"Well, whatever happened, it's stopped happening, and we need to

make sure that if Ramia does get free, there's not going to be a population barbeque." Ryoko said succinctly. "If you're feeling better, Tenchi, then there are four of us who can fight and if somehow Sasami fails, we might stand a chance, working together. And Ryo Ohki, you know what I want from you, don't you? Sakura and Hiroshi don't need to be a part of this… stay here with them and keep an eye on them, all right?"

Ryo Ohki mewed in agreement, flicking her ears then bounding up onto Sakura's shoulder, and Sakura petted the creature playfully.

"I guess we're still playing fugitives, but at least now I feel safer being on this ship." She murmured. "We'll be good, Ryo Ohki. I promise."

"And you really need to change your clothes, Ryoko. Or at least tie your robe." Hiroshi added. "Or you'll be giving the entire city population a show they're really not ready to see."

"Ikeda!" Tenchi's eyes widened at this, and Ryoko snorted, eying Hiroshi keenly.

"And I thought there were some lines you didn't cross." She shot back. "You think I should be ashamed of my figure? Is that it?"

"No, but you're a bit distracting, and if you want Tenchi's mind on the matter at hand, you might want to cover up a little." Hiroshi's eyes twinkled behind his glasses. Ryoko sighed, retrieving her robe sash from the floor and tying it obediently around her waist.

"There." She muttered. "Okay? It's done. And now, so are we. We'll see you back here later, hopefully when everything has died down. Meantime, I hope Sasami's reached Misao in time to talk her out of doing something crazy."

"I don't know." Najya looked troubled. "I could feel Misao's determination. She might not be easy to talk around. I just hope she remembers not to kill her mother, even if she is angry. After all… well… Ramia's magic is bad enough inside Ramia. In Misao's hands, I dread to think what might happen."

"Well, Rumiya. Here we are."

Misao paused, staring up at the shadow of Tounochi as she bit her lip, absorbing the tall, imposing structure with more than a few misgivings. "It seems so much bigger and darker in real life than it looks from the window of the Council complex. I've never stood this close to it before."

“Are you still sure you want to do this, Misao-sama?” Rumiya fluttered his feathers nervously, cocking his head on one side as he took in the barrier’s strange appearance. “The light isn’t as bright as it normally is, but even so, I don’t even know if you can get through it.”

“I’m going to get through it, somehow.” Misao said doggedly. “I know you can fly through it, Rumiya, so you will stay by my side, won’t you?”

“Of course. What else would I do?”

“Good.” Misao sighed, glancing up at the parapets once more. Then she gathered her courage, nodding her head.

“If it’s weakened, maybe I can push myself through it.” She murmured. “At the very least, I’m going to try. I wish we had Yurikage-sama’s sword, Rumiya. I think that if we did, it would be able to cut through the shield.”

“Najya-sama said that you weren’t to touch that sword again. And I agree with her.” Rumiya said firmly. “It would affect your magic too, Misao-sama. You know that.”

“True.” Misao bit her lip. “Okay. Misa wants to know why we’re stalling, so I guess we’re not any more.”

“I’ll fly through first.” Rumiya spread his wings, launching himself in the air. “Stay close behind me, Misao-sama. If you can. I don’t want Lady Ramia to hurt you.”

“Stop calling her Lady. She’s no such thing.” Misao said vehemently, glancing at her hands, then reaching out tentatively to touch the waning forcefield. The sensation burnt and prickled against her fingers, and hurriedly she drew her hand back, eying the damage with a pensive frown. Then, steeling her courage, she set her teeth, forcing herself to walk directly into the glow. As she plunged deeper into the barrier’s wall, the heat and sensation of discomfort became almost overwhelming, and tears sprung into her eyes.

“But I can’t turn back.” She murmured to herself. “I’m only half Arian. Only half! So it can only half hurt me. The other half has to get me through there, and I will. I will! Now the barrier isn’t as strong as it was, I *can* do this. And if it’s getting weaker, then my mother will soon be able to break out. Even if she’s all Arian, she’s strong. As soon as she realises how weak it’s become, she’ll get out and start killing people and I’m not going to let that happen!”

With this pep-talk, she found the sensation of pain suddenly dissipate and she opened her eyes, realising with a start that she was

on the inside of the barrier. She gulped, swallowing hard against a sudden sense of nausea that welled up in her stomach. Slowly and gingerly, she pressed her palms to the aging stone of the tower itself.

"We're here." She murmured. "Ru-kun? Are you with me?"

"I'm here, Lady Misao." The bird hovered lower, and Misao was comforted to hear the beat of his wings. "But you look terrible. Are you sure you can go through with this?"

"I… I'm all right." Misao made a superhuman effort to pull herself together, standing up straight and nodding her head. "Coming through that was… not easy, that's all. If it hadn't been so much weaker, and if I hadn't been part Shizukasari, I don't think I'd have made it. But my Father helped Prince Azusa seal this tower… I guess that helped me, in the end."

She drew a deep breath into her lungs to steady herself.

"I'm really all right now, Rumiya. I promise. But I don't know where my mother is held. I need your help."

"Yes, I know." Rumiya looked reticent, but he nodded his head, landing deftly on her shoulder once more. "It's quite easy to find. There's a door about two yards to the left, and it's only bolted from the outside. The barrier means that nothing else is needed. Ramia-s… your mother's room is at the top of the flight of steps."

"Then that's where we're going." Misao said firmly. "Come on."

For a while they walked in silence, both more than a little aware of the magnitude of what they were about to do. As she pulled open the heavy door, Misao cast Rumiya a sidelong glance, aware of his tension as they began to mount the steep, turning staircase.

"He's afraid. Maybe more than I am." She realised. "Because she's hurt him badly already, and he doesn't know what she might do to him when she knows he's alive. But he's still here with me, despite that. I… I'm glad he is. I wouldn't want to be here alone. Even if she did make him do bad things, Rumiya is my friend. And I have never had many of those to fall back on."

"What are you thinking, Misao-sama?" Rumiya asked softly, and Misao started, offering him a shy smile.

"How glad I am that you're here." She admitted, her cheeks pinkening. "And that I don't have to do this alone."

"I wish neither of us were here." Rumiya admitted. "But you're the Lady of Yousai. And my friend, Misao-sama. I owe it to you."

“And I owe it to Yousai.” Misao sighed. “To Father, too. He would have wanted me to avenge his death, if nothing else. To put to rest the murderer of my father, once and for all.”

“Are you going to kill her?” Rumiya looked alarmed. Misao faltered, then she shrugged.

“Misa wants to.” She murmured. “I… I don’t know, Ru-kun. That’s the truth. Part of me thinks that I should. That if Ramia wasn’t there, she couldn’t hurt anyone ever again.”

“And what about you?” Rumiya demanded. “What would happen to you, if Ramia died?”

“Her magic would pass on to me.” Misao said slowly. “But Misa thinks we could handle it. Somehow.”

Rumiya fidgeted, clearly agitated, and he shook his head.

“Ramia’s magic is terrible. In all ways.” He murmured. “I don’t want to see it taint you too, Misao-sama. Please.”

“Najya-sensei said the same.” Misao admitted. “That it would be too strong for me. But even so… I don’t want to kill anyone, Ru-kun. Especially not someone I’m related to. I know how awful it feels to spill someone’s blood. But then…”

She sighed, shaking her head slowly.

“I guess we’ll see.” She murmured. “When we get there.”

“Which we almost are.” Rumiya twitched his wings, feathers fluttering to the ground as he did so. “Around the next bend, Lady Misao. That’s where Ramia-sama’s chamber is.”

“Okay.” Misao felt an involuntary shiver go down her spine. “Then I guess this is it.”

Even as she spoke, the door of the chamber loomed out of the darkness, and Misao swallowed hard, fumbling against the wood for any kind of catch or bolt to open it. As she touched it, however, a scalding sensation burned through her skin and she let out a yell of pain, pulling backwards as she gazed at her palm in horror and dismay. There was the sound of soft, amused laughter, as slowly the door swung open, the slight creak of the ancient hinges adding to the sinister atmosphere as for the first time in ten years Misao found herself face to face with her mother.

“Well, well.” Ramia spoke in low, sweet tones, appraising her visitor from head to toe. “And of all people, I didn’t expect you to

come here. How did you get inside the barrier, Misao-chan? I would have thought it would have been beyond a weak child like you."

"Papa was Shizukasari." Misao said flatly, stifling her fear as she gazed up into her mother's cold amber eyes. "Or did you forget?"

"No, I didn't forget." Ramia's eyes narrowed. "His pathetic meddling will remain in my mind for some time to come. But if you think you can turn on me now, Misao, you're wrong. The barrier is weakening. I can open this door, and soon I will be able to open all doors and fly freely across Yousai. When I do, do you think that I will spare the people? I do not like betrayal — as some of my former serving maids could have told you."

At this her gaze rested on Rumiya, and an interested flicker entered her marigold gaze.

"Rumiya." She murmured. "So, did that demon Najya save your worthless life? I thought I'd spoken for you, but no matter. I'll not make the same oversight twice."

"You aren't going to hurt Rumiya!" Misao objected, sudden rage flaring through her as she felt Misa's mischievous, pulsing resentment well up through her body. Before she knew what she was doing she had pushed her mother firmly back into the room, her hands hovering together as Misa's black and silver fan materialised in her grip. "I didn't bring him here so you could hurt him again! You're a horrible, evil person, making him do the things you did, and I hate you for it. I hate you!"

"Do you think I care what such a worthless, weak wretch thinks of me?" Ramia's eyes flickered with irritation and she folded her arms, gazing on her daughter with icy gold eyes. "You are worse than useless to me. You are far too pathetic. Far too much your father's daughter. To think that I, the Saotome mage, should be cursed with such an heiress. That one day my power should pass to you — it makes me sick even to consider."

"I'm not your heiress. I'm *not* a Saotome!" Misao's anger bubbled up once more and light flickered around her body. "I'm Misao Amano! I'm a Shizukasari! I'm not a part of your stupid family and I don't want your magic! I don't want to be any part of the evil things you do, do you understand? You used me — you used *Misa* — to kill an innocent man who only wanted to protect me. And you hurt my friends — Rumiya and Sasami — and I won't forgive you for that. I'm never going to be a Saotome. Never, ever, ever, do you hear me?"

"That's fine by me." Ramia's eyes glittered dangerously, and despite

herself, Misao faltered. “You are no longer useful to me. And now you are here, I can hurt you. You *and* your pet bird. You were stupid to come here alone, Misao… very stupid. I would have thought Rumiya would have advised you better, had he really been any kind of a friend to you. I guess your parrot let you down again, didn’t he? Such a shame. Here. Let me deal with that trouble for you, shall I?”

Amber light shot out from her fingers, and Rumiya let out a shriek as it scorched against his feathers, causing him to jump from Misao’s shoulders. Misao screamed as a second blast of energy made contact with her friend and the blue parrot fell heavily to the floor, his body morphing and changing back into his human form as he dropped.

“Rumiya!” She exclaimed. “What did you *do* to him?”

“Taught him a lesson I’m about to teach you, musume-chan.” Ramia said softly. “About why it is you really shouldn’t disobey your parents. After all, in the end, we do know what’s best for you.”

Rumiya groaned faintly, and this seemed to break through Misao’s sudden daze, new resolve flooding through her as she faced her opponant square on.

“You’re just making Misa and I even more angry.” She said darkly. “You haven’t a clue what’s best for me. Even when Father was alive, you never spent time with me. I owe you no loyalty at all. None! I love Papa and I love Ojisama and the members of the Council who care for me. And that’s why I’m here. For them. All of them. For the people of Yousai. This is *my* planet, Mother, and I will *not* let you take it away!”

“I have another idea.” Ramia chuckled, a surge of energy engulfing her body. “How about you stay here and play with your pet parrot, while I go take a birds eye view of the city?”

She spread her arms, and before Misao’s horrified eyes, the glittering light of the forcefield that had surrounded the chamber windows suddenly flared and dissipated in an explosion of light, glittering shards of magic raining down on the ground below like confetti. Ramia caught her expression, and nodded.

“You got in. Now I can get out.” She murmured. “I guess you weakened it even more for me, forcing your way through to meet me. Thank you for that, musume. It seems you helped me after all — more than you know.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

For a moment, nothing in the chamber moved. Then, very slowly, Ramia's aura began to glow more strongly, and Misao bit her lip, recognising the strange, almost ethereal sheen of magic that she had also seen in Najya the first time the two had met. As Ramia's strength grew and widened, Misao found that she was aware of a tremendous, pulsing dark energy, and despite herself she felt a stab of terror shoot through her.

"If I kill her, that will be inside me." She murmured. "But if I don't… if I don't…"

"You seem troubled, my daughter." Ramia sent her an amused look. "Don't you like seeing me as I truly am? I told you. I'm the Saotome mage. Every bit equal to that Akara witch who thinks to try and stop me. I will kill her, and without an heir, her family line will die. Then the Saotome will control Airai, and I will take Yousai in my family's name. Then Jurai… then the universe will recognise what kind of power my people truly wield!"

She tilted her head, eying her daughter thoughtfully.

"First, though, I will kill you." She said pleasantly. "You are in my way, and once I take control of this world, I can find myself another fool man to marry. I am young yet — young enough to beget another heir."

"Misao-sama!" Rumiya stirred at this, struggling to pull himself up as he dragged his bruised body in between Ramia and her daughter. "*No*, Ramia! You can't hurt Lady Misao! I won't let you!"

"How many times must I kill you?" Anger flared in Ramia's amber eyes. "I already destroyed your likeness! What will it take to finally put an end to your miserable existance?"

"Rumiya." Misao dropped down at her friend's side, putting her arms protectively around him. "Maybe your magic isn't as powerful as you think it is, Mother!"

"It's more powerful than either of you, and there are other ways to kill you." Ramia said darkly, advancing on them menacingly. "I will put an end to the both of you, right here and right now."

"*Stop*!"

At that moment the chamber was bathed in white energy, and Misao raised her gaze uncertaintly, shock and fear crossing her expression as she registered the presence of another, hovering and ethereal in the entrance of the chamber.

"Well." Ramia turned, a malevolent smile on her lips as she absorbed the newcomer's appearance. "Princess Sasami. How nice of you to remind me that there are more people than just these two wretches on my hit list."

"Nobody is going to die, Ramia." Sasami spoke strongly, stepping forward into the chamber and holding out her arms, sending a soft white shield around the place where Misao still sat, cradling the beaten Rumiya in her arms. "I won't let you. I told you already. I don't like killing!"

"Don't you?" Ramia's eyes narrowed to slits, and she crossed her chamber, flinging back the lid of her carved box as she reached inside for the object she sought. "And what of the Space Pirate Haki? What of him? You are just as much bound to me as they are. No amount of pathetic magic from your friends can change that. So long as I hold you in my hands like this, I can make you do whatever I choose. Even kill Misao and her pathetic parrot, if I so choose!"

She held up the glittering effigy at this, and Misao let out a cry of fear and alarm as she recognised the image of the Goddess, ensnared in the red of Ramia's rays.

"Sasami-chan, no!" She exclaimed. "Don't let her hurt you again! Please! Don't let her!"

"Noone's going to hurt anyone." Sasami said decidedly, resolution on her young face as she raised her hand, sending a soft flicker of magic across the chamber and watching as it encircled the likeness slowly and gracefully, wrapping itself delicately around the seething mass of red light. She closed her fist, and the idol disintegrated into shards of blazing white energy, dropping harmlessly onto the ground below as cooling ash.

"What did you do?" Ramia stared at the Princess in astonishment, and for the first time, Misao realised her mother was unsettled. Sasami frowned, shaking her head.

"You shouldn't make other people do your dirty work for you." She said frankly. "Tsunami doesn't like it and nor do I. She's purified your magic spell, that's all. Your little dolls won't do anything to anyone

any more. To me, to Misao, to anybody. And we're going to do the same to you."

"I don't think so." Ramia said coldly, her own aura flaring back into life. "Tsunami is weak against elemental Arian magic. We've already proved that."

"Maybe she is." Sasami folded her arms across her chest, even as the Wings of the Light Hawk spread strongly out around her, touching the walls of the chamber as they bathed her in an unearthly glow. "But that doesn't mean *I* am, Ramia. I told you. *I'm* Tsunami's soul. And I'm flesh and blood, just like you are. Tsunami is weak against you, but you forgot about me. I told you you couldn't take control of her and you didn't listen. Now I'm going to stop you doing any more bad magic to anyone, do you hear me? I'm fed up with all of this! I came to Yousai to help Misao and her people and I don't like that you've tried to ruin it for everyone! And most of all, I don't like that one of my friends died because of you! He was a good man, and I liked him. He was kind to me and he didn't deserve to die!"

"You really are confident, aren't you, for one so young and so human." Ramia snorted. "Fine. Very well. If you want to fight me so badly, so be it. But you're just a child, and you have weaknesses. You'll soon see that I don't. I have no ties — no people whose lives matter to me. And I will kill Misao and her parrot, when I've spoken for you and Jurai. Well, Tsunami? Are you still so sure you want to battle?"

"I don't want to fight you at all, because I don't like fighting." Sasami said sadly. "But I'm not going to let you do more bad things, so if that's what it takes…"

"Then I'll be waiting for you." Ramia murmured. "Come find me, Tsunami. Come take me on, if you're so brave."

With that her body flared with reddish light, dazzling the room's other occupants, and when Misao looked back, her mother was nowhere to be seen.

"She's gone." As Sasami's forcefield faded from around them, Rumiya struggled upright, gazing around him in alarm. "Where? What has she gone to do?"

"She's gone up." Misao said softly, raising her eyes to the ceiling. "I can sense her magic, still. She's gone towards the stars, Rumiya. Up into space, where she thinks we can't follow her."

"Are you both all right?" Sasami asked anxiously, the magic aura

gone as she hurried to her friend's side. "Najya-san said you'd come here and I was worried about you. Ramia is nasty and dangerous and she could have hurt you!"

"She might still." Misao said quietly. "Sasami-chan, I'm so sorry. I'm so very sorry. I… I hurt your friend. Lord Motonoya. It was my… I mean I…"

"Shh." Sasami shook her head, grasping her friend gently by the hands and pulling her to her feet. "I know. And it wasn't your fault. It's all right. I don't blame you. Noone does. Not even Yurikage-sama would."

"Maybe." Misao looked troubled. "But what now? Are you really going to go fight my mother? She was hurting you so much before… can you stop her?"

"Yes. I'm all right now, thanks to Yurikage-sama's sword and Tenchi's determination." Sasami agreed. "Tsunami and I are back on the same side — in fact, I feel stronger, somehow, than I did before. So I have to. It's just something I have to do. I'm Jurai's guardian and the people of Yousai are subjects of Jurai, too. So I have to. It's as simple as that. After all, you asked me to come here to help protect Yousai against evil, right?"

"Yes, but we only thought you'd bless the shrines." Misao bit down on her lip. "Sasami-chan, let me come with you."

"Can you?" Sasami looked doubtful. "Go up there, I mean. Into space?"

"I don't know." Misao admitted. "But Misa… Misa wants to. And she thinks we can. She thinks that if Ramia can, and Najya-san can, *we* can. So I want to try. After all, you're not the only one who has to help protect Yousai. My Father wanted me to learn how to do this, too. And we need to stop her, somehow."

Sasami faltered, and Misao frowned.

"Please." She added. "It's important to me. I'm scared, Sasami-chan, but I… I need to do it. You know that I do."

"All right." Sasami sighed. "Take my hand, and we'll both go. All right? We'll do it together."

"You can't kill Ramia-sama, Lady Sasami." Rumiya said anxiously. "If you do, her magic will go into Misao-sama and hurt her."

"Understood." Sasami said firmly. "I wasn't going to, anyway. I don't like killing people. It's ugly and messy and it's wrong, too."

“How are we going to stop her then?” Misao looked helpless.

“We’ll find a way.” Sasami said firmly. “Rumiya, will you go and tell Ryoko and Tenchi and the others what’s happening? And tell them not to come after us. Tsunami and I can handle it, especially with Misao’s help. I don’t want anyone to get hurt and Ramia is sneaky. She might try and attack one of them to distract me. I’ve never used Tsunami’s magic in battle myself before, so I… I need to really be able to concentrate on what I’m doing.”

“Yes, Hime.” Rumiya bowed his head, then, “Good luck. And… and come back safely. Both of you.”

“We will.” Sasami dimpled, and Misao found herself comforted by the mischievous twinkle in her young friend’s eye. “Come on, Mi-chan. Let’s go and put your mother to rights once and for all!”

“Something’s afoot.”

Ryoko squinted across the horizon, a dark expression in her amber eyes as she gestured towards Tounochi. “Look. Something’s definitely going on over there. We should go — maybe they need our help.”

“Sasami asked us to stay here, so we will.” Tenchi shook his head. “Although I do know what you mean. The barrier’s fading, that’s what’s wrong. Something’s affecting it — but I don’t know if it’s Sasami or something else.”

“I’d go with something else.” Washu sighed, shaking her head. “Sasami wouldn’t let Ramia roam around Yousai if she could stop her.”

“Unless she’s already beaten her?” Tenchi suggested hopefully.

“No luck, I’m afraid.” Najya grimaced. “I can still sense Ramia’s magic, and it’s getting stronger, not weaker. I think she’s the one breaking through the barrier. It’s finally weak enough for her magic to affect it. We should be on our guard… it might be that we wind up facing her, after all.”

Before anyone could respond, the last of the forcefield’s energy exploded into a cascade of light, and Ryoko bit her lip.

“I don’t like that.” She murmured. “What about Sasami and Misao? And that stupid bird? What’s happening to them?”

“You think Rumiya is with Misao?” Tenchi demanded. Ryoko nodded.

“He’s nowhere else.” She replied. “Where else would he be?”

“You almost sound worried about the kids, Ryoko.” Washu observed. “I thought you weren’t a child person.”

“I’m not.” Ryoko flushed indignantly. “But that doesn’t mean I want to see them splattered. Besides, Rumiya’s an idiot, but he does care about Misao. And Misao’s just as much an idiot, letting herself get lured into facing Ramia on her own. For all we know they could have been killed already, and then where are we?”

“Misao isn’t dead. I can sense her magic, too.” Najya said softly. “But it’s nowhere near as strong a force as Ramia’s. I hope the Princess knows what she’s doing. If it turns into an all out fight, there will be blood shed. Ramia’s not the kind of mage to spare innocent lives if she can create victims in her path.”

“Look!” Tenchi let out an exclamation at that moment, pointing towards the tower. “What’s happening? Something’s… something’s coming out?”

“Ramia.” Washu’s eyes narrowed. “All right. Get ready. Najya might be right. We may have a fight on our hands after all, and I’d rather eliminate any threat before people like Azaka, Kamidake and Seiryo get it into their heads that they can fight this witch without magic of their own.”

“She’s not coming this way.” Ryoko shook her head, her brows knitting together. “Whatever it was, it went up. Straight up, like a rocket. Towards the upper atmosphere and space.”

“What is she playing at?” Najya looked startled. “I don’t like this. What is she going to attack from up there? Does she think she’s strong enough to take the whole planet, if she attacks it from above?”

“Is that a possibility?” Tenchi demanded. Najya shrugged.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “My mage-magic is new to me, and I never saw my father attempt anything so evil. I don’t know what the full limits of our magic is. But if that is her plan, we have to find a way to stop it.”

“I think Sasami’s already on it.” Washu said softly, as a bright whiteish glow soared out of the top of the tower, flickering for a moment, then surging upwards in the direction Ramia had gone. “I think Jurai’s guardian just became Yousai’s, too.”

“Is she strong enough?” Tenchi bit his lip. “Fighting Ramia’s spell all week must have hurt her, and we know Tsunami is vulnerable to

Arian magic."

"I think the greater risk is, is she *too* strong?" Washu looked troubled. "When we went to Kihaku, Tenchi, Tsunami was loath to use her magic to destroy the planet, or to engage in conflict with my sister. She knew her magic was far too powerful, and that planets or even entire solar systems could be wiped out in one blow. That's why Sasami has fought so hard to prevent Ramia from taking control — and why Tsunami's not performed at her strongest in any conflict since Ramia cast her spell. But now… I don't know. Will Sasami be able to bring Ramia to heel without making this planet and others around it suffer? She couldn't fight Tokimi — will she be able to fight this time?"

"You mean she might be helpless against Ramia, after all? She might not be able to stop her?" Najya looked alarmed. Washu shrugged.

"Tsunami is a protective force. She's not there to cause harm." She said softly. "That might be the deciding factor, in the end."

"So maybe we should take Ryo Ohki and go after them." Ryoko suggested. "Sasami might need help."

"No." Washu shook her head. "If Ramia's idea is to lure Sasami away, we must be here in case she launches some attack on Yousai. We have to leave it up to our Princess to make the decisions, now… it's not something we can interfere in."

"Sasami-hime isn't alone." Najya murmured softly, raising her gaze to the sky. "Misao is with her. I can sense it. They're together."

"Misao too?" Tenchi's eyes opened wide. "Is she able to do that?"

"She seems to believe so." Najya shrugged. "I guess we'll see."

"Lady Ryoko! Lady Ryoko!"

At that moment, a fresh voice interrupted the conversation, and as Ryoko turned, she saw the blue parrot hurtling towards her, his pretty feathers singed and dirtied from his experience within the tower.

"Rumiya." She murmured. "So you were with Misao, after all!"

"Yes." Rumiya dropped to the ground, morphing back into his human form as he struggled to catch his breath. "I… Sasami-hime… she…"

He faltered, and Washu dropped down at his side, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Take your time.” She said quietly. “What happened? Did Sasami and Misao go after Ramia, is that it?”

Wordlessly Rumiya nodded.

“What else happened? Is Ramia going to attack people on Yousai, or what?” Ryoko demanded. Rumiya swallowed hard, then raised his gaze to the pirate’s.

“I don’t know.” He managed finally. “She has… her full… power. But she… seems to… want to… kill Tsunami… first.”

“The question is, can she.” Najya frowned. “Should we be helping her? What did she say?”

“Lady… Sasami… said… noone was to… to go after them.” Rumiya choked out. “That she… didn’t want… any distractions. And Ramia… might use… people as… decoy targets.”

“Then we stay here, and hope our Princess knows what she’s doing.” Washu said firmly. “Stay with us, Rumiya. It’s as safe as anywhere, now.”

“I never believed in… the power of Tsunami… before.” Rumiya admitted. “Not in… the same way that… Misao-sama does. But now…”

He trailed off, glancing up towards the sky, and Washu nodded.

“Sasami holds a power unique in this universe.” She murmured. “And it’s not because she’s Tsunami. It’s because of who she is — her capacity for love and acceptance is greater than anyone I know. That’s why she’s such a strong force, Rumiya. And why she’s so well loved on Jurai. Even without the Goddess’s touch, Sasami is a force to be reckoned with. We just have to have faith in her, that’s all. And trust that somehow, she’ll find a way of doing this, for the sake of everyone on Yousai and on Jurai.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

It was cold and bleak up above Yousai's atmosphere, and as they surged into the blackness, Sasami stifled a shiver, forcing back her own fear and apprehension as she gazed all around her for any sign of their enemy. Memories of the last trip she had took into space haunted her senses, and she bit her lip, forcing them back.

"This is not time to dwell on Haki." She muttered fiercely, more to herself than anything else, but Misao shot her a startled look, concern in her gaze.

"Are you all right, Sasami-chan?" She asked softly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Sasami began, then she sighed. "No, I'm not going to lie. I'm scared."

"Me too." Misao admitted. "And I can't see where she is. I wish we could go back, Sasami. But we can't, can we?"

"No." Sasami sighed again. "There are people we care about who might get hurt, if we do. But I wish I knew better what to do, Misao. I'm still just a kid too, when it comes to it. And I've never used Tsunami's magic on my own before. She's not stopping me — its as if she understands I need it, and more, I can reach it, now. But even so… it feels wrong. Strange. And I'm a little afraid of what it can do."

"I feel the same about Misa's magic." Misao confessed. "But my Father… he left me a letter, Sasami, and he reminded me what I was born to be. Both of us, we were born to be something other than just kids, weren't we? We were born to help stop people like my mother."

"I guess we were." Sasami sighed heavily. "All right. You're right."

She paused, then,

"Can you breathe up here? Are you all right, on your own?" She asked anxiously. "If I pull my shield away, are you going to survive?"

"Yes." Misao said firmly. "I'm all right. Misa has magic too, and she's letting me use it."

"You talk about her like she's a different person." Sasami

commented. Misao shrugged.

"At the moment, she is." She admitted. "But maybe not in the future. One day."

"This is all very touching."

At that moment, Ramia's voice echoed out across the expansive blackness, and with a glitter of light, the mage became visible before them, her skin glowing with ethereal energy and her thick, lustrous red hair flowing out around her as if teased there by an imaginary wind. "Well, and I really didn't expect to see you up here, musume."

"Stop calling me that!" Misao shot back, goldish light enveloping her body as she pulled away from Sasami's protective shield, her fan-blade clutched in her hands. "I'm *not* your daughter! Not any more!"

"You can't escape your destiny, Misao." Ramia shook her head. "Either I kill you, or one day, you become the Saotome mage. All this power and darkness, swelling through your senseless young heart. Maybe then you'll see sense and understand. Look at me — this is the future that awaits you."

"I'm *not* going to be like you!" Misao objected, and consternation flooded Sasami's young heart as she saw her friend's expression harden with anger, the soft aquamarine eyes flaring gold once more as Misa's dark resentment fought for control of the girl's soul. "*I won't*! I'm stronger than that, and you can't scare me! I'm going to *stop* you, so there!"

"Stop *me*? When you don't even know who *you* are?" Ramia said mockingly. "I think not."

She turned, flexing her fingers at Sasami, and shards of amber-red light crackled out across the airless space, glancing against the girl's forcefield and causing it to flicker and buckle. "Well? Tsunami's soul, what about you? Are you so weak or afraid you can't fight back?"

Sasami glanced at her hands, then up at the mage that hovered before her.

"If that's the best you can do, you won't hurt Tsunami." She said quietly. "You're not inside her any more, so you can't burn her the way you did before."

"But you don't seem willing to make a move either, Princess Sasami." Ramia said scornfully. "Are you just a child after all? Do I overestimate you now?"

Sasami faltered and as she did so, she felt a soft whisper press

against her senses as the Goddess's spirit surged inside of her.

"*Don't be goaded into making a rash attack, my sister.*" That was Tsunami's voice, soft, gentle and reassuringly familiar, soothing Sasami's jumpy nerves with her words. "*You know the true power of Tsunami and what it can do. You must stop her without causing harm to anyone else. And above all, you must not kill her. Tsunami does not kill. She protects and heals… she does not slay*."

"I know." Sasami nodded her head, determination in her expression as she redoubled her forcefield, deflecting more of Ramia's attacks as she did so. "But how am I meant to do that, Tsunami? If I can't attack her, what else can I do?"

"Are you talking to yourself? Or to the Goddess that cowers within you?" Ramia taunted. "Does she want another taste of my magic, Princess? I'll be more than willing to oblige her."

A wild red flare of energy ripped out across space at this, catching Tsunami's shield head on and slicing into it, searing across Sasami's body and causing the Princess to let out a gasp of surprise and pain.

"You see, I'm not afraid to fight." Ramia laughed. "Are you?"

"Sasami-chan!" Misao exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"I… I'm all right." Sasami nodded, and even as she spoke the words, she could feel Tsunami's gentle touch within her body, healing the wound before it even had a moment to sting. "I'm fine."

"But her magic can hurt you." Misao's eyes narrowed, and Sasami saw the hard amber glint of her eyes once more as the fan-blade glittered with light. "She can't hurt *me* so easily. I've pierced one person's heart with this, and I'm willing to pierce another. For making me what she has, I'll kill her myself, Sasami. I'll stop her, and then she won't try and hurt you again!"

"No! Misao, stop! You mustn't!" Sasami exclaimed, but Misao paid her no attention, launching herself at her mother, who chuckled, raising a shield of her own to meet her daughter's attack.

"Stalemate." She murmured. "My magic can't hurt you, and nor can yours hurt me."

"My blade can, though." Misao said darkly. "Shall we test it, and see?"

"*Misao*!" Sasami darted forward, the wings of the Light Hawk spreading out around her as she forcibly divided her two companions. "You *can't!* Don't let her taunt you! She'll hurt you, or worse — if you

hurt her… you know what she said! What Rumiya said. *You can't kill her*!"

"I don't care what happens to me." Misao spat out, and Sasami could feel the prickle of angry Arian energy pressing against her shield. "She's tried to steal my life from me enough times. I want revenge, Sasami. I want to *stop* her, once and for all!"

"This isn't Misao speaking! It's Misa and you're not thinking rationally!" Sasami objected. "If you give in to her, you'll be plagued by this magic your whole life. And worse, you'll have to live with another death on your conscience. When you wake up — when you become Misao again — you'll know what you did, and it will hurt, because Misao *isn't* a killer!"

"This is turning interesting." Ramia folded her arms, glancing from one young girl to the other as she contemplated what was going on. "Misao is half my daughter, Princess. She has half my family's desires and darkness. She's already part way there — do you think your weak Juraian magic can save her?"

"I don't care about magic." Sasami said firmly, reaching out her hand to take Misao's in her grip. "I care about my friend. You wouldn't understand that, because you don't care about anyone but yourself. But I like Misao and I want her back. I don't want her to feel like this — angry and resentful and full of hate. I know you did it to her, and I know it's not who she really is. So I want to *help* her."

"S… Sasami?"

As the Princess finished speaking, the flare of light around Misao's body faded and she raised her gaze to her friend's, confused. "I… what did she… am I… all right?"

"You will be. You just have to stop Misa letting you get angry." Sasami said softly. "Ramia wants you to do that. To go at her, so she can kill you. That's all."

"I see." Misao frowned. "I'm really not very good at this, am I? I should have stayed on the ground."

"The first sense either of you have spoken since this began." Ramia said archly. "Well? Are you going to fight me, or are you going to just hover there babbling? Because if you're no opposition for me, Tsunami-kami-sama, I know I have other things to take care of."

Sasami frowned, pursing her lips. Then her grip on Misao's fingers tightened, and she shot her friend a beseeching look.

“We can’t do this seperately.” She murmured. “Tsunami’s magic is so strong that if I was to try and attack her, I might kill her. More, I might take out all of this solar system, including Yousai and all the people we care about. Tsunami isn’t designed to be an attacking force. She’s a defender. A protector. She could do real harm, if I let her attack Ramia and I think Ramia’s spent enough time in Tsunami’s thoughts to know that.”

“So what can we do?” Misao looked helpless. “I don’t understand — what do you mean, together?”

“What I say.” Sasami said firmly. “My magic and your magic. Together. If I mix a little bit of mine with a bit of yours — your Yousai magic, your Arian magic — maybe we can stop her, after all. If we can trap her, I can try and do what I did to her stupid dolls. Purify her magic. But right now, I can’t… she’s too strong and I can’t risk that kind of attack.”

Misao’s eyes narrowed, then she nodded.

“I’ll try.” She promised. “Misa still wants her blood, but… but I think I’ve got control of it, now. Thanks to you.”

“Well?” Ramia taunted. “Are you going to fight me? Or aren’t you?”

“Fighting doesn’t solve anything.” Sasami said firmly, feeling Misao’s grasp on her hand tighten once more as she spoke. “This has to stop. Now. And we’re going to stop you, Ramia. Once and for all!”

As she spoke, white magic shimmered out across space, laced as it was with delicate golds and ambers, and as she sent her friend a sidelong glance, she saw Misao’s eyes closed in concentration. Ramia snorted, flinging up a forcefield to deflect the magic, but as Sasami redoubled her own efforts, she felt a connecting pulse of energy dart across her body, linking her magic to Misao’s as that girl’s own strength grew and flourished. This time the energy that spread across the divide was not edged with gold, but a gentle blue energy, and as Sasami stared at Misao, she saw her friend’s hair begin to glimmer and darken, returning to her natural colour as the intensity of the magic connection grew.

As it made contact with Ramia’s forcefield, the red barrier scattered into a cascade of light and Ramia let out a yell of rage as Sasami spied her advantage, wrapping the mage in her own coccooning energy. From within, Ramia struggled, and Sasami closed her eyes against the pain of the mage’s vicious attacking magic, drawing instead on Tsunami’s strength as she sought to contain the woman within her grasp once and for all. Dark images and haunting thoughts flickered

all across her senses, taunting and disorientating her as for a moment her mind connected with the mage's own. With a super-human effort she wrenched her thoughts away, but tendrils of Ramia's darkness continued to pluck at her senses, as if determined to peck away at the barrier one inch at a time. Sasami bit her lip.

"I'm not sure if I can hold her." She admitted. "Misao, I need… I need your help again. Please. I need you."

"I'm here." Misao assured her, and as Sasami opened her eyes, she saw her friend hovering beside her, bathed completely in a gentle blue glow. Thick waves of dark hair cascaded out around her, flickering with energy, and there was determination in her aquamarine eyes as she pushed her hands together, sending out a flare of pure sapphire energy towards the struggling, seething mass that held Ramia a prisoner.

"Mi-chan." Sasami breathed, as her friend's energy made contact with the cocoon. "What is that? Where did it… what…?"

"I don't know. I guess… I guess it's Misao's magic." Misao shrugged, looking non-plussed. "When we did magic together, Sasami, it was like… I felt this strength well up inside of me. Like Misa and I weren't divided any more, but… I can't explain it. And then I felt so much stronger than I did. That's all. Strong enough to do this."

She looked anxious.

"Is it enough? Can you hold her now?"

"Yes." Sasami agreed, bringing her hands gently together as she engulfed the imprisoned mage once more with Tsunami's pure, clear energy. This time, she felt Ramia's struggles weaken and then desist completely, and she sighed, resisting the sudden fatigue that threatened to wash over her.

"I think… I think it's done." She whispered. "She's stopped fighting me. She's alive, Misao. I know that. I can feel her heart beating against my barrier. But she's not fighting any more. I think… I think she's lost consciousness. Tsunami can't feel her anger or her thoughts, either. I think it's over."

"Then we should take her back to Yousai." Misao said decidedly, and Sasami stared at her, a confused look in her crimson eyes.

"She's Yousai's prisoner." Misao explained. "And so long as she's alive, she has crimes to answer to. Lots of them. Including the murder of your friend, Sasami-chan. And that of my father."

“Yes. I suppose you’re right.” Sasami agreed. “All right. Then we’ll go down. I don’t know how long I can hold the shield around her anyway, and I don’t want to accidentally kill her.”

She held out her hand to her friend again, and Misao smiled, taking it firmly in her grip.

“Thank you for your help, Sasami-chan.” She murmured. “I don’t know what you did to me, but thank you, anyway. Somehow I think Misao is… is one person again. Thanks to Tsunami.”

Sasami dimpled, a hint of her usual mischief entering her tired crimson eyes.

“I don’t know that it’s all down to me.” She said thoughtfully. “I think it’s something else.”

“Such as?” Misao looked startled. Sasami shrugged her shoulders, suddenly seeming the thirteen year old Princess once again.

“We make a good team, you and I.” She said simply. “We really do.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

"I suppose that you'll be going back to Jurai now, won't you, Sasami-chan?"

It was three days later, and after the fierce battle fought above Yousai's skies, the Council of Yousai had acted quickly and decisively, arraigning Ramia for the murder of Misao's father and sentencing her to a long prison term. Stripped of her magic and her influence, she had put up little fight, and that morning Lord Oshima had seen to the installation of his young charge as Lady of Yousai, formally placing the coronet of office on her brow as she received Tsunami's blessing from the Goddess herself.

Now, however, all was calm, and Sasami and Misao had sought some time in peace and quiet together in the Council grounds, both aware that they would very soon be once more parted.

"Yes, I suppose so." Sasami replied now, resting her chin in her hands as she sprawled out on her stomach on the grass, paying little attention to the condition of her gown as she did so. "It's a shame, Mi-chan. It seems like I only just got here, and we haven't had much time to spend together, with everything. It's been a mess… and I haven't seen half of Yousai, either. I'd like to, now… but Father and Uncle both want me home, and after what's happened, Seiryo-sama doesn't think it's a good idea to resist."

"I suppose your family are worried about you." Misao looked wistful. Sasami nodded.

"They are, and I've missed them." She admitted. "Especially when things were difficult. But I have to go. I have to… to take Yurikage-sama home, and tell his family myself what he did for me, so they know that he died in Tsunami's service. I don't know how that's a good thing, but Kamidake thinks that they'll be comforted some if they know that — that he died bravely and in the name of his Princess. So I'll go and I'll tell them. And give them back his sword."

She sighed.

"I spoke to Father last night, and he said the sooner we come home the better." She added. "Uncle Azusa and Ayeka are feeling much better, so they knew that things had gone our way, but I'm almost

sure I saw Papa with new grey hairs. He can be so protective, but at the end of the day, I guess he was worried about all of us. It must've been hard for him, stuck there without being able to help anyone at all."

"Maybe." Misao looked thoughtful. "But you know, even though my father has passed on, I think he was with me when we were fighting against Mother up there, among the stars. So perhaps your father was with you too, Sasami. Even if he couldn't actually be. After all, we are partly them too, aren't we? Even Tsunami has real flesh and blood parents… right?"

"Yes, I suppose she does." Sasami dimpled. "And she's lucky because she has mine. You're right. I suppose they were all rooting for us."

She frowned, gazing absently up at the drifting clouds.

"It's just sad I have to leave Yousai so soon, now it's all peaceful." She admitted. "Mi-chan, this isn't the last time we'll see each other. I will come to Yousai again, I promise. And you must come to Jurai, just as soon as we can arrange it. After all, as of this morning, you are Lady of Yousai. So you can make a… a diplomatic visit. Or something. And I'll introduce you to Seiryo-sama's sister Suki and show you my planet."

"I hope so." Misao's dreamy aqua eyes lit up as she considered this. "I want to travel all over the Empire, Sasami. Or even further. I'd like to go to the Earth again, one day. Now I know that my mother isn't a threat to anyone, I think it will be all right. And I'm not as scared as I was, not now."

"What will happen to Ramia, do you think?" Sasami wondered. Misao pursed her lips.

"Lord Oshima wants her to be imprisoned here until she dies, now that Tsunami has purified her dark magic once and for all." She said thoughtfully. "But I don't want her here. Even if she is Yousai's prisoner, I really don't want to know that she's on this planet. Not when she caused so much suffering. Najya-sensei wants to take her back to Airai to face justice there and I think I'm going to agree. Najya-san promised she won't be killed, so I think that would be best. For her to go home to Airai, and leave Yousai forever."

"Yes, I suppose." Sasami looked thoughtful. "Najya-san wants Jurai and Airai to be friends, and so do I, now. I'm going to speak to Uncle about it. After all, Najya-san came here to help, and she did. So I'll see what Uncle says. Maybe it's time we stopped being afraid of Airai's

magic. I still think of when Tenchi used Yurikage-sama's sword to free me from Ramia's curse. That was Jurai magic and Arian magic bonded together, that did that. With a little bit of Earth magic thrown in too, I guess. So they must be able to work together, mustn't they?"

"Like we did. In space." A faint smile touched Misao's lips, and Sasami nodded.

"That's what gave me the idea, when we were up there." She admitted. "It worked once before. But you have more than Arian magic. Your father must have had magic of his own, too… after all, he helped Uncle to seal Ramia in the first place."

"He did. And I guess I do." Misao agreed. "I'm still learning a lot of things about myself, I suppose."

"And what about Rumiya, Mi-chan?" Sasami's eyes became mischievous. "Now that everything is calm, what about him?"

"What about him?" Misao pinkened, and Sasami laughed.

"A little bird told me you kissed him." She said innocently, and Misao's colour deepened, as she buried her head in her hands.

"We haven't really spoken about it since." She admitted, embarrassed. "I did it because it seemed like, well, we might be going to die and Misa… well, she thought I should take a chance. I like Rumiya more than Ojisama and the council would approve of, if they knew. And I think he likes me, too. But… I don't know if I can do anything about it. We're still kids, after all. I haven't really thought about it much."

She sighed, eying her friend keenly.

"You must understand, though. I mean, you're in the same situation, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" Sasami was startled.

"Kamidake-san." Misao said earnestly. "You like him, don't you? And yet he's a Knight and you're a Princess of Jurai?"

Sasami stared, aware that a hot flush crept across her face at her friend's words. Misao grinned.

"You didn't know I knew that, did you?" She teased. "But when you were first ill, I saw how you were with him. You do like him, don't you, Sasami-chan? If you're worried I'll tell anyone, I won't. I can keep a secret. But you know how I feel about Ru-kun, because it's the same for you."

“Yes.” Sasami owned, glancing at her hands. “I like him a whole lot, to be honest. But no, I don’t know if anything will ever come of it.”

She sighed, a pensive look on her face.

“Sometimes it sucks, being titled.” She added. “I hate it.”

“Maybe.” Misao said thoughtfully. “But it can be a good thing, too. Lord Oshima and the others won’t be able to send Rumiya away if I tell them they can’t. And that’s a good thing, after everything that’s happened. I want him to stay, and now everything is all right, maybe I’ll ask him to train to be my Knight, like Kamidake-san is yours. That way he’ll be here with me, and I… I can see him often.”

“That sounds like a plan.” Humour sparkled in Sasami’s eyes. “I think that he’d like that, too.”

“Tsunami is really all right now, inside you?”

“Yes.” Sasami pursed her lips. “I decided, though, that I need it to be more than just me, when Tsunami is in trouble. Azaka and Kamidake used to carry her magic with them too, but I used it once to rescue my friends from danger. When we get home, I’m going to give it back to them. As a safeguard, so they can defend themselves and Jurai, if they need to.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“As much as any of it does.” Sasami said sheepishly. “Kamidake told me something last night, though, and I’m still trying to absorb it. He said that I was becoming more Tsunami all the time. When I asked him what he meant, he said that I should be able to work it out for myself. That there’s a reason why Tsunami always says that the decisions are mine and she’ll obey my will. And thinking it over, I think I know what he meant now. That I’m not ever going to become Tsunami, exactly. I mean, I’m not going to wake up one morning and decide that today’s the day. Tsunami’s told me herself that I’ve always been her, and I always will be. But now I’m starting to figure it out. What they were trying to tell me is that I’m not really turning into someone or something else. As I go further on, I manage to draw more and more on Tsunami’s magic and her experience. Eventually, there will just be a time when I can do all the things Tsunami can do, and then we’ll be one being. But I’ll still be Sasami. I’ll still be myself, and I’ll still make the decisions. All of Tsunami’s things are inside of me, after all. I just wake them up one by one, as I get more strong.”

“You really were born Goddess of Jurai.” Misao murmured. Sasami

nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “And for the first time I think I’m really truly okay with it. Completely okay with it. Now I understand what it really means.”

“I’m going to miss you so much, when you all go.” Misao admitted. “I’ve learnt a lot of things from this visit, but most of all I’ve learnt how kind people from Jurai are. And I’m glad Yousai are part of the Empire… it makes me feel safe. That there’s always someone I can ask for help, if things get too heavy or strange. That’s important to me. I want to know that there’s someone looking out for me, even though Father isn’t here to do it himself.”

———

“What do you suppose they’re talking about?”

From across the grounds, Washu nudged her neighbour, nodding in the direction of the two young teenagers. “It’s been a heavy few days for them both — I doubt either one of them will ever be the same again.”

“It doesn’t mean that should be a negative thing, though.” Najya said contemplatively. “I have seen a lot of good in Misao. And with Ramia’s magic annuled, even when she dies, it can’t invade the girl’s spirit. Misao has a lot of spiritual power locked up inside that body, but most of it isn’t Arian, not really. I think she’ll be a fine Lady of Yousai. And as for Lady Sasami… she has promised to speak to the Emperor about relations with Airai. I may, at long last, be able to achieve peace for my world too. So all in all, I’m content.”

“Yes. I suppose so.” Washu frowned. “But the emotional scars… some of those might remain a while. The deaths of Yurikage Motonoya and Haki the Space Pirate will loom in their memories… I doubt they’ll forget those so easily.”

“Perhaps not.” Najya acknowledged. “But they’re young yet, and they have much to experience. They’re not as old and jaded as we are, Washu-chan. They’ll be all right.”

“Maybe that’s true.” Washu chuckled. “I do have a lot of faith in Sasami to bounce back… it’s something she’s good at, I have to admit.”

“There, then.” Najya grinned, linking her arm in her companion’s as they turned back towards the complex itself.

“What of you, Najya? You’ll go back to Airai now, then, and

negotiate with Azusa?" Washu asked. Najya nodded.

"Yes, for the time being." She agreed. "But I will make time to visit this Earth of yours. I'm starting to see what you see in the people there, to be honest. Tenchi, Sakura and Hiroshi — they all have a spirit about them that I've not seen before. It's refreshing, somehow. I'd like to see the planet that created such a race of people."

"And we'd be more than glad to have you, I'm sure." Washu assured her. "Old friends are always welcome at the Masaki house."

"So, are we leaving already?"

As they entered the main council chamber, Ryoko descended on them, impatience in her gold eyes. "We've been waiting long enough, Washu! Ryo Ohki is ready to go when you are, and there's no sense in us staying around. Sakura and Hiroshi have been away for a lot longer than anyone intended, and people will be worrying about them back home. Plus this whole planet reeks of bad karma, and I've really no interest in being talked into a trip to Jurai."

"Impatience, Ryoko-chan." Washu chided lightly. "We're here. Najya, can we give you a lift as far as Airai? Or are you all right to find your own transportation?"

"I can take myself home, just as I came." Najya assured her. "Besides, I want to spend some more time with Ramia's daughter, first. Make sure that all is well with her, before I leave. She may be a Saotome, but I like her very much already. And I don't want to just abandon her, when I'm sure there are things I can help her understand."

"Then I suppose we'll be taking our leave of you now, then." Washu said slowly. She hesitated, then hugged her friend tightly. "Take care of yourself, Najya. And keep in touch. I'll hold you to your promise to visit, so make sure you don't let me down!"

"I wouldn't dream of it." Najya's ruby eyes sparkled with mischief. "Have a safe trip home, Washu."

"Then we can go?" Ryoko interjected impatiently, and Washu laughed, nodding.

"I'm all yours." She agreed. "Is everyone else aboard?"

"Yes, that's why I came to get you." Ryoko nodded. "Come on, already. Ryo Ohki's already asking me if we're going today or tomorrow. Tenchi made the mistake of mentioning his carrot crops and now she wants to go home and raid the fields!"

She grabbed her mother roughly by the arm, and Washu felt her molecules shift and speed through space, realigning themselves aboard the jagged craft as Ryo Ohki let out a yowl.

“I could have brought myself, you know.” The scientist objected. “You didn’t need to drag me here.”

“It was one way to make sure you were coming.” Was Ryoko’s unsympathetic rejoinder. “I’ve had enough of Yousai. Come on, Ryo Ohki… we’re all here now, so let’s move on out, okay?”

Ryo Ohki mewed, her crystals glittering with light as the craft surged into life, and across the control room, Sakura let out a sigh, settling herself more comfortably against the ship’s walls as she did so.

“It’s been one wild summer holiday.” She murmured. “I still can’t quite believe all of it. And I’m not sure I’m in any rush to repeat the experience, to be quite honest. Not in these circumstances.”

“I guess it’s been an eye opener for the both of you, hasn’t it?” Washu reflected, dropping down beside her with a grin. “To see the other side of Tenchi and Ryoko’s world.”

“I’m sorry you and Ikeda got pulled into one of our messes, Sakura-chan.” Tenchi said apologetically. “It wasn’t on purpose.”

“Hey, it’s all right. We all lived to tell the tale.” Hiroshi said thoughtfully. “I mean, ’Kura is right, but even so… no harm was done, was it? And we got to see the universe a little more, too. I think I’d like to, well, see more planets, someday. When it’s not a life or death mission. Just to visit.”

“You’re not put off then, by this?” Ryoko asked him playfully. Hiroshi shook his head.

“There were some very pretty girls at Jurai’s court.” He mused absently, and Sakura swiped his arm reproachfully.

“Ikeda!” She protested. “Is that all you ever think about?”

“Why not think about it?” Hiroshi teased. Then he relented. “No, seriously, death threats aside… I’m glad we came. If nothing else, I think I understand more about the kind of crazy-ass life you live, Masaki. And that helps to explain why you’re such a basket case, sometimes.”

“And I suppose that Ryoko wasn’t kidding, when she said you were powerful.” Sakura acknowledged. “You wielded that sword like a true professional soldier, and you brought a Goddess back to her senses. It’s hard to equate that guy with the guy who trips over his laces, but I

guess I have to, now. I mean, I've seen it."

"Tenchi is one of a kind." Ryoko grinned warmly at her fiance, who returned it with one of his own. "He and I, we don't quite fit other people's ideas of a normal, stereotypical couple."

"That's an understatement if ever there was one." Washu observed acidly, and Ryoko grimaced at her.

"Stop it." She ordered. "I can't blast you *and* fly my ship."

"I suppose now we know why you and Ryoko have such a bond, Tenchi." Sakura glanced at her hands. "If you've been in lots of situations like this one, well, I guess I can see how it must've pulled you both together. It's the sort of life noone on the Earth would really believe. I can see now, why when we first though Ryoko was a threat, why you defended her so much. You told us then that she'd put her life in danger on your behalf enough times, and that you'd both been through things we couldn't understand. Now I think we're starting to. The universe really is bigger than just the Solar System, and some of it is really dangerous."

"But so long as people like Tenchi, and Ryoko, and Sasami are out there to help protect it, there's some kind of balance." Washu reflected absently. "And so far it's never been tilted too far in the enemy's favour."

"But you're not the only one who could use some nice peace and quiet for the rest of the summer, now." Tenchi admitted. "Saving the universe is one thing, but I don't want it to take over my whole life. I'm a full time student, and I graduate in the Spring. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll not have to do any more dare-devil missions between now and then."

"Are you and Ryoko going to tie the knot, when you've graduated, Masaki?" Hiroshi asked curiously, and Washu saw an awkward, embarrassed look pass between Prince and pirate.

"Maybe." Tenchi said at length. "We've not discussed it yet. At all, really. We've only just got past the engaged stage… I don't know when we'll take the next step."

Ryoko was silent for a moment, gazing out at the space-scape beyond as she contemplated his words. Then, at length, she turned, offering him a smile.

"I think I'd like it, though, if it was that way." She said softly. "When you graduate."

“Ryoko?” Tenchi’s eyes widened. “Are you serious? I thought you weren’t in any hurry to rush into marriage?”

“I’m not.” Ryoko said honestly. “But this isn’t rushing. Tenchi, Sakura’s right. All these things, they pull us closer together. But every time they do, there’s a chance one of us will be lost forever. And I don’t want to be in a situation where I never get the chance to marry the man I love. That’s all.”

She hesitated, meeting Washu’s gaze for a split-second, and the scientist smiled, her green eyes softening as she understood the undertone in her daughter’s words.

“That sounds wise to me.” She said gently. “And if that’s what you both want, I’m sure there’ll be no opposition from anyone at home.”

“Then I guess a wedding is on the cards.” Hiroshi said reflectively. Tenchi shrugged, looking non-plussed.

“I guess it is.” He agreed, but Washu could see the flicker of pleasure deep in his brown eyes. “Though I have a strong feeling that, knowing us, it’ll be anything but a straight-forward affair!”